



ETHNIC CLEANSING AND SECTARIAN KILLINGS IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

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Cover photo: Burning/looting of Muslim property and a mosque in PK 26 area, north of the capital Bangui, Central African Republic, 23 January 2014.

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I. SUMMARY

“Ethnic cleansing” of Muslims has been carried out in the western part of the Central African Republic, the most populous part of the country, since early January 2014.¹ Entire Muslim communities have been forced to flee, and hundreds of Muslim civilians who have not managed to escape have been killed by the loosely organised militias known as anti-balaka.

“They killed my children heartlessly,” said Oure, a Muslim woman whose four sons were killed by anti-balaka fighters on 26 January. She, her two sisters, their 75-year-old mother, and seven of the family’s children had gone out early in the morning, trying to reach a church in the northwest town of Baoro, when they were caught by an anti-balaka militia unit. “The children were slaughtered in front of our eyes,” Oure continued, sobbing: “both my children and my sisters’ children.” One of Oure’s sisters, Aishatu, was wounded on her hand when she tried to protect the children, who were boys ranging in age from 8 to 17 years old.

Amnesty International has documented large-scale and repeated anti-balaka attacks on Muslim civilian populations in Bouali, Boyali, Bossembélé, Bossemptélé, Baoro, Bawi, and the capital, Bangui, in January, and has received credible information regarding additional attacks in Yaloke, Boda, and Bocaranga. Some of these attacks were carried out in revenge for the previous killing of Christian civilians by Seleka forces and armed Muslims.

In one of the deadliest attacks, which took place in Bossemptélé on 18 January, at least 100 Muslims were killed. Among the dead were several women and old men, including an imam in his mid-70s. Two days later, anti-balaka fighters killed four more Muslim women who had been hidden in the house of a Christian family.

Invariably, it is civilians who have borne the brunt of the spiralling inter-communal violence. At least 200 Muslims have been killed and hundreds more injured in the anti-balaka attacks documented by Amnesty International, and large numbers of Christians were killed in reprisal attacks. In addition to causing death and destruction, attacks against Muslims have been committed with the stated intent to forcibly displace these communities from the country. Many anti-balaka fighters and their supporters maintain that Muslims are “foreigners” who should leave the country or be killed. They appear to be achieving their aims, with Muslims being forced out of the country in increasingly large numbers.

The ethnic cleansing of Muslim communities is part of a larger tragedy unfolding in the Central African Republic. Since the mostly Muslim Seleka coalition seized power in March 2013, the country has been shattered by violence, much of it against members of the Christian community. The Seleka, which left power in mid-January 2014, killed thousands of Christian civilians, and looted and burned thousands of Christian homes. The lawless and abusive nature of their rule gave rise to unprecedented sectarian violence and hatred, with many Christians attributing responsibility for the Seleka’s abuses to the country’s Muslim minority as a whole. Their fear, anger, and desire for revenge spurred the development of the predominantly Christian anti-balaka.

Concern over the increasingly sectarian nature of the violence in the Central African Republic led the UN Security Council in December 2013 to authorize the deployment of peacekeeping forces in the country. Those forces, now comprised of about 5,500 African Union forces (International Support Mission to Central Africa, MISCA) and 1,600 French troops (Sangaris) have deployed within Bangui as well as to several towns north and southwest of the capital. Yet they have been slow to fill the power vacuum created in mid-January when interim President Michel Djotodia resigned and the Seleka began withdrawing from these areas.

International forces failed to swiftly deploy to these areas to protect civilians, allowing anti-balaka militias to assert themselves. In town after town, as soon as the Seleka left, the anti-balaka moved in and launched violent attacks on the Muslim minority. These developments were entirely predictable, given the deep-seated anger of both the anti-balaka and of large sectors of the Christian community, who largely held the Muslim minority responsible for Seleka abuses. Already, in December 2013, Amnesty International had warned of this danger.²

Ongoing anti-balaka attacks against Muslims and repeated threats by anti-balaka and their supporters to force the Muslim minority out of the country have caused intense and understandable fear. Convinced that no one is able or willing to protect them from future attacks, Muslims have fled broad swathes of the country en masse. Amnesty International has seen numerous towns and villages that have been emptied of their Muslim communities, or have only tiny rump populations left sheltering in and around churches and mosques, desperate to be evacuated to safety. Majority Muslim neighborhoods of Bangui, facing sustained and relentless attack, have also seen mass exodus and civilians there are also increasingly under threat.

The urgency of the situation demands a robust and immediate response. In order to protect the remaining Muslim communities in the Central African Republic, and to prevent the violence from spreading even more broadly, international peacekeeping forces must take rapid steps to break anti-balaka control over the country's road network, and to station sufficient troops in towns where Muslims are threatened. Given that Seleka forces have been regrouping in towns to the north and east of the capital, there are increasing concerns about the possible outbreak of sectarian violence in these areas. Non-Muslim populations, in particular, could be at risk of renewed Seleka abuses. To address these challenges, international peacekeeping troops should be granted the necessary resources to handle the country's difficult operating environment.

The country's new transitional authorities, as they reconstitute basic government structures and institutions, must also take steps to restore security and the rule of law. In rebuilding the police and the armed forces, the transitional government needs to take care to supplant the de facto power of lawless anti-balaka militias, not to consolidate it. Anti-balaka should, for example, be ejected from the military bases that they currently control and their numerous roadblocks and checkpoints should be removed.

The exodus of Muslims from the Central African Republic is a tragedy of historic proportions. Not only does the current pattern of ethnic cleansing do tremendous damage to the Central African Republic itself, it sets a terrible precedent for other countries in the region, many of which are already struggling with their own sectarian and inter-ethnic conflicts.

This briefing focuses on events in the western half of the Central African Republic during January and early February 2014, and is based on the findings of an Amnesty International delegation that spent two weeks investigating unlawful killings, forced displacement, destruction of homes and property, massive looting, and other serious abuses, some of which amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity. The delegation interviewed hundreds of victims of the violence as well as many others with firsthand information.

II. BACKGROUND

The current violence, hatred, and instability are a direct result of the human rights crisis that began in December 2012, when mostly Muslim Seleka forces launched an armed offensive that culminated in their seizure of power in March 2013. The seeds of sectarian mistrust were, however, sown long before the start of the Seleka's oppressive rule. In the months preceding their government's fall, former President François Bozizé and his advisers tried to incite sectarian anger as part of a last-ditch effort to hold onto power. Attempting to delegitimise the Seleka, Bozizé branded them foreign terrorists and Muslim extremists, urging the country's "patriotic youth" to fight them.³ A member of his cabinet, Pastor Josue Binoua, charged that the Seleka rebels were being equipped by Wahabi extremists.⁴

The gross and systematic human rights violations committed by the Seleka—which technically became the ex-Seleka in September 2013—have been well documented.⁵ (The formal dismantling of the Seleka had no meaningful impact on their activities, and Amnesty International refers to them as the Seleka, rather than the ex-Seleka, in this report.) During their nearly ten months in power, the Seleka were responsible for massacres, extrajudicial executions, rape, torture, and looting, as well as massive burning and destruction of villages. By 10 January 2014, when Transitional President Michel Djotodia left office, some 935,000 people, or 20 percent of the population, had fled their homes. The country's human rights crisis was also a humanitarian catastrophe, with many displaced people lacking access to sufficient food, water, sanitation, shelter, and health care.

Over time, the Christian community's strong anti-Seleka views, nurtured by rampant Seleka abuses, developed into widely shared anti-Muslim sentiment. Many Christians interviewed by Amnesty International seemed to attribute responsibility for the Seleka's abuses to the Muslim minority as a whole, believing that all Muslims were, at the very least, complicit in Seleka abuses. Although both Muslims and Christians suffered under the Seleka, the Christian community bore the brunt of the Seleka's oppressive rule, engendering a strong sense of grievance. Some Muslims, including some ethnic Peulhs, directly participated in Seleka violence, including killing civilians and looting civilian homes.⁶ In other cases, when Christian homes were looted, Muslim homes were left untouched.⁷

By September 2013, when the mostly Christian anti-balaka militias began carrying out armed operations, the targets of their revenge attacks were Muslim civilians as well as the Seleka. In the months before the Seleka left power, anti-balaka fighters carried out a series of attacks on villages and towns, carrying out large-scale killings and the widespread burning and

looting of Muslim homes. The current mass displacement of Muslim civilians was presaged, in late 2013, by smaller-scale displacement driven by anti-balaka attacks.

What changed the balance of power dramatically, however, was the arrival of French forces in Bangui in early December 2013. Although planning for the operation began earlier, the actual deployment started in the immediate wake of a massive Seleka attack on the Christian population of Bangui, in which an estimated 1,000 people were killed.⁸ At the same time, the UN Security Council approved the deployment of troops under an African-led International Support Mission in the Central African Republic (MISCA), essentially re-hatting and expanding an existing African force.⁹

The Seleka very quickly found themselves militarily outgunned and politically outmanoeuvred. After a few Seleka were killed in confrontations with French forces, the Seleka became a much less visible and commanding public presence.¹⁰

On 10 January 2014, Transitional President Michel Djotodia, the leader of the Seleka, resigned from office and went into exile in Benin. With Djotodia's departure, Seleka forces were left in disarray: they began to withdraw from the towns and villages they had formerly controlled. All across the country, in a stunningly short period of time, numerous Seleka outposts were replaced by anti-balaka militia.

French and MISCA forces did little to stem the anti-balaka's advance. Outside of Bangui, especially, there were few international peacekeeping troops; indeed, in many towns, there were none at all. And even within Bangui the anti-balaka gained control of neighbourhoods, secondary roads, and certain military installations.

By 23 January, when Catherine Samba-Panza was sworn in as the new interim president of the Central African Republic, the anti-balaka militia had gained effective control over broad swathes of the western half of the country. They were also aggressively contesting for control of areas, like the northern town of Bozoum, in which they were not yet fully dominant.

III. ANTI-BALAKA ATTACKS ON MUSLIMS

Since 8 January, Amnesty International has documented a series of deadly attacks on Muslim communities in towns and villages across the western half of the Central African Republic. In the capital, Bangui—as well as in the towns of Bouali, Boyali, Bossembélé, Bossemptélé, Baoro, and Bawi—anti-balaka militias have carried out lethal and coordinated campaigns aimed at killing Muslims and forcing the survivors to flee. Alongside large-scale anti-balaka attacks, there have also been countless cases of individual lynchings in which it is unclear whether the perpetrators were anti-balaka fighters or simply armed civilian mobs. Indeed, one of the most worrying aspects of the current violence is the blurring of lines between organised armed groups and vigilante crowds.

To escape anti-balaka attacks, Muslims have fled numerous towns and villages, including Bozoum, Bouali, Boyali, Bossemptélé, Bossembélé, Bouca, and Baoro. Many of these localities are now entirely empty of their Muslim former inhabitants, while in others, small numbers of Muslims, a fraction of the original community, have taken refuge in and around churches and mosques. When asked their intentions, nearly all of those who still remain told Amnesty International that they felt they had no other option but to leave as soon as they possibly could.

More substantial numbers of Muslims remain in a few medium-sized towns such as Bouar, as well as in the capital, Bangui, but most are planning to flee as soon as they can arrange safe transportation. “Everyone wants to leave,” a neighbourhood leader in Bouar emphasized in early February. “We’re all just waiting for the opportunity.” Even in the PK-5 neighbourhood of Bangui, a majority Muslim area considered to be the centre of the capital’s Muslim life, thousands of frightened Muslims are packing up and abandoning their homes. Although a handful of towns in the region, including Paoua, seem relatively untouched by the violence, it is far from clear that they will remain so.

The journey to safety is difficult and dangerous. While some people manage to get on flights out of Bangui, most Muslims catch rides on large overcrowded trucks—each of which may carry 70-100 people in the open air.¹¹ Others cram into private cars that travel together with truck convoys. Some of these convoys are provided a military escort by Chadian or MISCA troops; others hazard the trip on their own.

Even while demanding that Muslims leave the country, anti-balaka militias frequently ambush these convoys, killing civilians as they flee. On 16 January, for example, some 20 civilians were killed and dozens injured outside the town of Bouar, when the vehicle in which they were fleeing was attacked. Some of the victims were hacked to death with machetes, others were shot. Among the victims were an 11-year-old girl, her 17-year-old brother, and her 21-year-old sister. Several other children were also among the injured, including a 12-year-old girl who was left paraplegic. In another case, on 14 January, after stopping a truck at a checkpoint in the town of Boyali and demanding that all of the Muslims get off, anti-balaka fighters killed six members of a single family: three women and three small children, aged one-and-a-half, 3, and 5 years old.

Muslims who are forced out of the Central African Republic face a precarious future. Many have left with little or no money and few material goods; some have only the clothes on their backs. Once they cross the border into neighbouring countries, Muslim refugees from the Central African Republic find continuing hardship. Some who left the country in the past two weeks have told Amnesty International that conditions in crowded reception centres in Chad, where tens of thousands have ended up, are deplorable. There are shortages of food and water, a lack of shelter, and an absence of basic medical care.

The economic deprivation of Muslims who have fled the country underscores another element of the current crisis. Although sectarian divisions are one motivation for the violence, financial incentives also appear to have played an important role. The forced displacement of the country’s Muslim population has been accompanied by massive looting. Thousands of shops have been stripped of their goods, and thousands of houses have been pillaged. Much of the pillage has been carried out by opportunistic civilian mobs. Given that Muslims make

up the majority of the country's merchants and traders, stripping them of their livelihood and forcing them out of the country—which in themselves are violations and crimes—also cast a shadow over the prospects for the country's future economic recovery.

The systematic pillage of Muslim homes and shops has also, in many cases, been accompanied by out-and-out destruction. Mosques have been particularly targeted. Some, like the mosque that used to stand in Bangui's Foh neighborhood, have been reduced to rubble by angry mobs. Others have been defaced with offensive graffiti, ransacked, and partially burned, their precious shrines destroyed and their sacred books torn.

With thatched roofs that catch fire easily, countless homes have been burned down. Both anti-balaka militias and retreating Seleka forces have engaged in these arson attacks, setting fire to thousands of homes belonging to both Muslim and Christian communities.

Anti-balaka militias have also used the threat of attack to extort money and goods from Muslim communities, and have abducted Muslims for ransom. In Bozoum, a northwestern town, Amnesty International interviewed five young Muslim men who were abducted in recent weeks by anti-balaka militias; the youngest was age 15. "They beat me and threatened to kill me," said Ismael Hamidu, one of the victims. "My family borrowed money to pay the ransom, leaving us with nothing."

The crimes currently being committed in the Central African Republic are of the most serious nature, including war crimes and crimes against humanity.¹² Unlawful killings, such as the deliberate killing of non-combatants, are being carried out systematically; looting and the destruction of civilian objects is also a daily occurrence.

These purposeful acts of violence aimed at displacing the Muslim population and forcing it to flee the country constitute "ethnic cleansing." Although the term does not have a formal definition under international law, a UN Commission of Experts has defined it as a "purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas... This purpose appears to be the occupation of territory to the exclusion of the purged group or groups."¹³ The anti-balaka militia groups each operate under a local command but with the common objective of killing Muslims and ridding the country of its Muslim population. The mass killing of civilians, destructions of homes, businesses and mosques and other means used by the anti-balaka to "ethnically cleanse" the Central African Republic of its Muslim population constitute crimes against humanity and war crimes.

At present, with attacks continuing daily, the possibility of a full-scale Muslim flight from the country is real. The following attacks—in Bossemptélé, Boyali, Bossembélé, Bouali, Baoro, and Bangui—are emblematic of a larger pattern of anti-balaka attacks on Muslim communities in the Central African Republic, and demonstrate why Muslims are leaving the country en masse.

ATTACK ON BOSSEMPTÉLÉ

More than 100 people were killed and scores were injured in Bossemptélé on 18 January 2014, following clashes between anti-balaka militias, on the one hand, and armed Muslim

civilians and Seleka remnants, on the other. No international peacekeeping forces were based in the town at the time, leaving civilians at the mercy of armed groups.

Because most of the Seleka forces had left town the previous day, the anti-balaka militias took control of the town practically without resistance, easily overpowering the small number of armed Muslims and Seleka members that opposed them. They then turned on the Muslim civilian population, whom they considered to be Seleka supporters. According to local priests and Christian volunteers who buried the dead and have been caring for the wounded, the victims were nearly all Muslim civilians. Most of the victims were adult men but they also included several women, children and the elderly. Two anti-balaka fighters were also killed in the clashes, while no Christian civilians were killed.

One of the medics who collected wounded civilians and the bodies of those killed told Amnesty International:

In many cases the wounds show that the victims were shot at close range. About 10 of the dead we found were women and some were children. One child, aged about 10, was shot multiple times and also mutilated; he had bullet wounds in the face, lower back and shoulder, and one of his hands had been cut off with a machete. We found his body in the centre of town, by the primary school. We do not know who he is; we have photos of this boy but have not had the courage to show them to the IDPs who are staying here to see if they know him.

Another medic told Amnesty International:

In Muslim houses in the town centre we found four charred bodies, two in separate houses, one in the mosque and one on the patio of a house; the latter was being mauled by pigs when we found it. In another Muslim house we found two wounded men and two bodies, all four were shot at very close range, execution-style. One of the wounded had been shot in the mouth and had his right hand cut off.

A 76-year-old religious leader, Imam Mahajir, whose son and son-in-law were killed and who was himself injured in the attack, told Amnesty International:

My son, Abdel Hakim, was hiding under the bed, because the anti-balaka kill any man they come across. They came in, took him to the market nearby and shot him dead there. They also took my son-in-law, Mohammed, and killed him by striking him with a machete at the back of his head. Later that morning, I was at home (I cannot run to the bush, as I am an old man) and when I saw a group of anti-balaka coming toward my home. I crouched against the wall to show them that I am not a threat to anybody. They could see me very clearly as they were near. One of them took aim and shot me three times, twice in the abdomen and once in my right arm, and left me for dead. Another of my sons found me and carried me on his shoulders to hide in the bush. He saw that I was going to die there without medical care, so he later brought me to the main road and from there some Christian brothers with a good heart brought me to the hospital.

Volunteers who found the bodies of the two men told Amnesty International that Abdel

Hakim, a 40-year-old tailor and father of eight, was shot in the abdomen. They confirmed that Mohammed, a 40-year-old father of three, was struck on the back of his head with a machete.

On 20 January, two days after the anti-balaka militias took control of the town, they found and killed four Peulh women who had been hidden in the house of a Christian family. The women were inhabitants of a neighbouring village that had been violently attacked by Seleka forces the previous month, and the anti-balaka fighters reportedly killed the women in revenge for that attack.

During the days following the attack, anti-balaka fighters continued hunting down Muslims in the bush, looking for people who had fled. Muslims described seeing numerous bodies outside of town rotting in the heat and being eaten by animals.

Many fleeing Muslims managed to escape through the efforts of courageous priests and Christian volunteers who walked all around the area searching for survivors, the injured and the dead. For days, these small groups picked up the wounded, collected and buried the dead, and brought other Muslims to safety in the Catholic mission on the edge of town.¹⁴ Several hundred Muslims and Christians now shelter in the mission, and injured victims are receiving treatment there.

The security situation of the displaced people and the clergy and volunteers who are sheltering them is dire. Anti-balaka militias enter the compound of the Catholic mission daily, threatening to kill the displaced Muslims and the patients in the hospital, and also threatening the priest, nuns, and medics. On some occasions they have beaten displaced people and stolen their belongings.

One of the priests expressed his frustration with the situation to Amnesty International:

We have been making all possible efforts to come to the rescue of the wounded and to collect and bury the dead, but have not received any help at all. For two weeks we have been calling for the MISCA and French forces to come to protect the IDPs or to evacuate them to somewhere safe, but we have had no response. The situation, for the displaced people and for us, is getting worse every day. Nor have we received any humanitarian assistance; nobody is hearing our call of distress.

ATTACKS IN BOYALI

Boyali, a small town about 130 km northwest of Bangui, was one of the first towns in the northwest to be taken over by anti-balaka militia. Immediately after Seleka forces left the town on 8 January, anti-balaka fighters launched an attack on its civilian residents, killing some 30, including 13 members of a single family. The rest of the Muslim population fled in fear. There were no international forces in the area at the time of the attack or in its aftermath.

Dairu Soba, a survivor of the attack, told Amnesty International about the brutal killing of his father and 12 other relatives, including three small children:

My father, Soba Tibati, could hardly walk because of bad rheumatism and could not run away when the anti-balaka attacked our village last Wednesday. They decapitated him in front of my eyes as he sat on a straw mat under a tree outside our hut. Twelve other members of my family were also massacred in the same attack: among them were three of my father's brothers, four sons of one of my uncles, my aunt, and three of my little cousins. The youngest was a baby girl who was just six months old.

Dairu Soba was himself shot in the left thigh while running away. Several other civilians were injured in the same attack, including 20-year-old Musa Hamidu, who was shot in the abdomen, 42-year-old Jibrine Hammadu, who was shot in leg, and a 65-year old who survived a machete attack. They all fled Boyali and took refuge in a suburb of the capital with other displaced Muslims, where Amnesty International found several survivors of the attack.

Later the same day, Seleka forces and armed Muslim civilians returned to Boyali to exact revenge for the attack, killing several Christian civilians and burning hundreds of home belonging to the Christian community.

Six days later, on 14 January, anti-balaka militias again attacked Muslim civilians in Boyali, this time targeting people who were trying to flee to safety. Six members of a single Muslim family, the Yamsas, were killed, all of them women and children.

Until mid-January, the Yamsa family lived on the outskirts of Bangui in an area known as PK 13. With the resignation of President Djotodia on 10 January, Muslims in their neighbourhood began to feel increasingly vulnerable and insecure. To escape possible violence, the Yamsas decided to send most of the members of the family to Cameroon, at least temporarily.

Nine members of the family planned to travel to Cameroon by truck, then the only available means of transport. At the last minute, however, it was decided that Ismael, the oldest son, would not undertake the journey; instead the group was made up of Fadimatou Yamsa, Ismael's mother; Abdul Rahman Yamsa, his 12-year-old brother; Bashir Yamsa, his five-year-old brother; Mujahid Yamsa, his three-year-old brother; Shamsia Yamsa, his seven-month-old sister; Deba, his aunt; Rabi, his cousin, and Rabi's 18-month-old daughter. Two or three other Muslims were on the same truck, which was otherwise filled with Christian passengers and goods.

During part of the trip, a Christian woman held Shamsia, who was tired. When the truck reached the town of Boyali, after a few hours of driving, it was stopped at a checkpoint by a group of anti-balaka fighters. The men pulled the Muslim passengers out of the vehicle and put them in the town mosque, allowing the truck and the other passengers to leave.

As Fadimatou left the truck, she whispered her family name and the name of a town to the Christian woman who was holding her baby; the woman pretended that the baby was hers. The next day, the woman delivered the baby to family members who lived in the town, and told them what had happened.

Of the group that was taken off the truck, only Abdul Rahman, the 12-year-old, survived. He managed to slip away during the melee, while the others were dragged outside, stripped of their clothes and money, and killed. Using machetes and knives, the anti-balaka fighters hacked up their prisoners in the street directly in front of the mosque. Large bloodstains were visible on the street for weeks. Local people in the area, including anti-balaka fighters, describe the massacre freely.

Abdul Rahman ran away to a neighbouring village, finding shelter with Christian villagers. When anti-balaka fighters arrived at the village looking for him, the villagers lied and said they had not seen him. The next day, a villager brought Abdul Rahman to the town of Bouali, handing him over to his paternal uncle, Amadou Yamsa.

“My brother cried non-stop for days,” Ismael Yamsa told Amnesty International a week after the attack. “But what most upsets us now is that my mother’s body was never found.”

The entire Yamsa clan has now gone into exile in Chad. Ismael Yamsa, his younger brother Abdul Rahman, and his father Abu Bakr fled Bangui on a Chadian convoy on 24 January. It is the first time that Ismael has ever left the Central African Republic; he has no idea if he will ever return.

ATTACK ON BOSSEMBÉLÉ

Located about 160 km northwest of the Bangui, the town of Bossembélé once had a thriving Muslim community, including numerous merchants and traders. After the Seleka took power in March 2013, however, relations between the town’s Christian and Muslim communities soured, with many Christians viewing their Muslim neighbours as complicit in Seleka abuses.

Later in 2013, as Christian anti-balaka militia grew in size and visibility, Muslims began to feel threatened. Muslim shops were robbed and anti-Muslim slogans were written on the walls. By mid-January 2014, after Seleka leader Michel Djotodia resigned from the presidency, and the Seleka began to retreat from their former strongholds across the country, members of the Muslim community believed themselves to be in mortal danger. Several Muslim residents of Bossembélé told Amnesty International that anti-balaka militia had sworn to kill all the Muslims as a group.

As rumours of upcoming anti-balaka attacks circulated, a larger number of ethnic Peulhs arrived in the town from nearby rural areas. The Peulhs, traditional herders, typically travelled

around the region grazing their cows, goats and sheep. Many families had already lost their herds in anti-balaka attacks; with nothing of value to keep them in the area, they decided to leave. Others sent the women and children of the family into town to escape, while the men stayed with the herd.

On the afternoon of 16 January, as the remaining Seleka force was leaving Bossembélé, nearly the entire Muslim population of the town left with them. Because no international peacekeeping forces were stationed in the town, the Muslims felt that they had no protection against the threatened anti-balaka attack.

All of the Muslims wanted to leave, and had gathered together near the mosque that morning to load the people and some of their belongings on trucks; however, there were not enough vehicles to transport everyone. Many rural Peulhs, being generally poorer than the Muslim shopkeepers who lived in the town—and thus less able to pay for transportation—were among the group of 100 or so that was left behind.

After the large convoy of fleeing Muslims left the town with their Seleka escort, the Muslims who were left behind gathered in and around the central mosque to await the inevitable anti-balaka attack, which came within hours. Some of the Muslims, who had a small cache of arms, engaged in a firefight with anti-balaka militias that lasted about an hour, but they were outgunned and outnumbered by anti-balaka fighters. By 8 pm that evening, all of the remaining Muslims were hiding in the mosque, which was surrounded by anti-balaka fighters. In the early morning, the anti-balaka militia stormed the mosque and deliberately killed numerous civilians. Many of the people who were hiding in the mosque managed to flee during the early-morning melee, but some of the escapees were later hunted down and killed. Approximately 25 bodies were found inside the mosque, and another 18 were found around the mosque and in other parts of the neighbourhood.

Not a single anti-balaka militant was killed in the incident, but among the 43 Muslims who were killed were women, old men, and a seven-month old baby. At least 12 others were injured.

It is not known how many of the dead and injured were killed in the firefight and how many were executed, but multiple sources described a deliberate, close range killing spree. According to the national Red Cross, most of the victims were killed with machetes and knives.

Twenty-year-old Mariam lost her husband and two step-children in the attack.¹⁵ She was also injured, as was her baby boy, whom she was holding during the attack. She told Amnesty International:

I was outside the mosque and there was a lot of shooting. The anti-balaka killed my husband Amidu in front of me; he was shot in the head. And his two children (from his first wife) were also killed. Usman, age 14, was shot, and Hamidu, age 12, was hit with a machete and also shot. I was hit in the left arm and my son Idrissa, who is 15 months old, was hit with a machete on the arm.

Mariam and her child are now receiving treatment in a hospital in Bangui.

Hajiza, in her 40s, told Amnesty International that her older sister's husband, Uba al-Haj (late 60s-early 70s), was among those killed in the mosque. She and three other women described how they themselves narrowly escaped death:

When the anti-balaka attacked we women ran with the children into the homes of some of our Christian neighbours. Soon after the anti-balaka came and threatened to burn the homes of the Christian families who were sheltering us if they did not hand us over to them. Maybe they heard some of our children crying and that is how they knew that we were hiding there. The anti-balaka took us away; we were 27 women, 26 children and five men. They held us until 21 January, when some foreigners [an international organization] came to take us to Bangui.

Aishatu, aged about 60, has an injured hip that prevented her from walking, so was unable to try to flee the mosque when the anti-balaka fighters entered it in the morning. She watched in terror as they killed her relatives and friends. "I begged them to spare my life," Aishatu told Amnesty International. "I closed my eyes, waiting to be killed, but they didn't kill me." She and her infant granddaughter were later picked up by an international organisation and transported to a hospital in Bangui.

Many of the Muslims who escaped Bossembélé have already fled the country; others are trying to get a place on one of the convoys leaving in the coming days. "I've never been to Chad and I have no family there," a 45-year-old Muslim man from Bossembélé told Amnesty International. "I'm only leaving to save my life."

When Amnesty International visited Bossembélé on 23 January, they found it under the clear control of anti-balaka militia, who had taken over previous Seleka positions. The town's mayor, Augustin Volongao, gave the Amnesty International delegation a short briefing on the events of the past year in his town. He described a series of Seleka abuses, emphasizing the terror the Seleka inspired, but—to the delegation's surprise—he failed to even mention the slaughter in the mosque and the flight of the town's entire Muslim population.

"The killings continue," the president of the local Red Cross told the Amnesty International delegation. "We found five bodies yesterday, and five more today, all of them Peulhs."

ATTACK ON BOUALI

Most of the Muslim residents of Bouali, a small town 100 km northwest of Bangui, fled the town on 17 January 2014. A large convoy of vehicles was made ready to leave the town at the same time as the last Seleka forces, as Muslims had been warned that the anti-balaka would take the town that day. No international peacekeeping forces had been stationed in the town, so the population felt it had no defense.

The anti-balaka attack took place while many Muslims were still packing their belongings and preparing to flee. The attack left five Muslim civilians dead, three of them women, and injured some 20 others.

A relative of several victims described how the attack took place:

It was prayer time, about 1pm, and we were packing up our belongings when a large group of young men armed with machetes burst into our compound. Everything happened very quickly. They did not say anything; they just started to hit us with machetes. They struck my father, Sanu, 55, repeatedly, and smashed his head, killing him on the spot, and they injured my mother, Fatimatu, 40, and her younger sister Aichatu, 30, who died of her injuries this morning [19 January] before she could reach the hospital. She had very serious head injuries; she left an eight-month-old baby girl, Ramatu, who is now an orphan.

The wounded spent a day and a half without medical care, before an ICRC vehicle brought them to a hospital in the capital, barely an hour away. They could not be evacuated sooner because the road out of Bouali and on to the capital was controlled by anti-balaka fighters who search vehicles and systematically attack Muslims, even the wounded.

Among the wounded who survived the attack and eventually made it to the hospital were Aishatu's baby daughter, Ramatu, who escaped with a minor head injury, and 11-year-old Fati, who had a deep wound on her head and another on her arm. She told Amnesty International that the young men who stormed her home struck her with machetes.

Immediately after the attack most of the Muslim inhabitants of Bouali fled to the capital with the retreating Seleka forces. More than 800 Muslims did not manage to leave, however, and were left in serious danger. As anti-balaka militias consolidated their control over the town, they went house to house searching for Muslims, as well as checking vehicles on the road out of the village. Fearing for their lives, the remaining Muslims took shelter in the local Catholic church under the protection of a young local priest, Father Xavier Fagba, who vowed to protect them in spite of anti-balaka threats. French peacekeepers promptly deployed around the church to prevent the militias from attacking it. They were later replaced by MISCA forces, who remain at the church as of this report's publication date.

Except for a few who have managed to join convoys to Chad, the displaced Muslims—now some 647 in number—remain in the church in dire humanitarian conditions. Bouali is barely an hour from the capital, but despite repeated pleas from Father Fagba they have received little humanitarian aid and have not been able to secure safe passage out of the area.

CONTINUING ATTACKS IN BANGUI

In the capital, the site of the largest-scale inter-communal violence in December 2013, sectarian killings and other attacks continue on a daily basis. Unlike in December, when the ex-Seleka targeted Christians, the current targets of such attacks are mostly from Muslim communities. The perpetrators are anti-balaka fighters and, in some cases, armed civilians who often describe themselves as anti-balaka supporters. Both groups declare their firm determination to drive Muslims from the country. Their relentless attacks have led thousands of Bangui residents to flee via flights to Chad, Cameroon, and elsewhere, and many thousands more to take perilous road journeys to safety.

At present, the overwhelming majority of the capital's neighbourhoods are no-go areas for Muslims. The only two areas where Muslim residents and displaced Muslims remain are a shrinking patch of the 3rd district, in the city centre, known as PK5, and a similarly shrinking

part of the PK12 neighbourhood, on the northern outskirts of the city. Prior to the current crisis, these were the two areas of the capital where Muslims made up the majority of residents. Even in these areas, however, Muslim residents are fleeing in droves and the remaining Muslims—a continuously shrinking proportion of what the community was just weeks ago—are for the most part feeling that they have no option but to leave.

The presence of international peacekeepers (both the French Sangaris and the African MISCA forces), who are deployed in far greater numbers in the capital than in any other part of the country, has likely prevented a repeat of the large-scale killings seen in the capital last December. However, their failure to disarm both Seleka forces and anti-balaka militias, and to prevent anti-balaka militias from exercising a significant degree of control on the ground, has left Muslim communities vulnerable to attacks and allowed an increasingly intimidating atmosphere to take hold.

A series of particularly gruesome killings of Muslim men has terrorized the Muslim community. A number of victims have been publicly lynched, their bodies mutilated—with limbs severed and genitals cut off and stuffed into the victims' mouths—and set on fire. The participation of members of the newly-reconstituted armed forces in a brutal and high-profile killing of a Muslim man at a military ceremony attended by the transitional President on 5 February further confirmed Muslims' feelings of insecurity.

Three members of a family—a man, his son and his brother—were killed in Bangui on 27 and 29 January. Mohammed Zakaria, a father of nine in his late 50s or early 60s, was hacked to death near his home in the Fondon neighbourhood. His relatives told Amnesty International that on 27 January, shortly after 1pm, a shot was fired into Zakaria's home when he was praying there. He ran out of the house but barely got 50 metres away before his assailants caught up with him and hacked him to death with a machete or similar sharp instrument, causing large lacerations on his head, neck and chest.

Two days later, his 52-year-old brother Abubakr Annour, a father of 14, and his 30-year-old son Ahmad, a student, were attacked at their home in the Combattant neighbourhood. They were hacked to death one after the other, and their bodies were mutilated and then set on fire.

Annour's relatives told Amnesty international that the attackers were anti-balaka fighters, some in civilian clothes and some in military fatigues, and that some of them had assault rifles. One of the relatives told Amnesty International that he was speaking with Ahmad on the phone when the attack happened. He recounted:

It was about 9am and Ahmad was at home with his father, two of his brothers, two sisters, and his stepmother. Some anti-balaka got into the courtyard and everyone in the house fled. Ahmad and his brothers hid at the back of the house but then Ahmad decided to run further away and managed to get to the 8th district's crossroad (which intersects with the airport road). At that point I lost communication with him. I called back several times and when I finally got through a man answered and said 'I killed your brother and I'm going to kill you too. I can see you very well,' though I don't think that he could see me. I did not know where Ahmad's body was exactly and so I kept calling his phone again and again and

eventually a man replied, who said he was just passing by. He told me where the body was and I called the Red Cross so that they could go to collect the body because it was too dangerous for me or other Muslims to go to that area, and even more so to go to collect the body of a Muslim.

Before the bodies could be collected they were mutilated and set on fire. Abubakr's head was almost completely detached from the body; on his chest was a large A-shaped laceration and his right hand was severed and removed (it was not found with the body). Ahmad's body was likewise mutilated.

Foreign journalists and human rights workers at the scene of the killings reported that as the bodies were being mutilated—one of them had his genitals cut off and stuffed into his mouth—and set on fire, crowds of anti-balaka and civilians alike gathered to cheer the killers' actions.¹⁶ French forces barely 50 metres away did not intervene to stop the mutilation of the bodies.

IV. ATTACKS ON CHRISTIANS

The waning power of the Seleka has not lessened their brutality. While largely defeated and with their movement and operational capability significantly hampered, they have continued to carry out vicious attacks on Christian civilians and their property at every opportunity. They appear to hold Christians collectively responsible for the deeds of anti-balaka elsewhere in the country and have justified their actions on spurious claims that the victims belonged to the anti-balaka.

Armed members of Muslim communities, acting independently or alongside Seleka forces, have also carried out brutal and large scale sectarian attacks on Christian civilians. They have in some cases turned on the Christian civilian population in the context of armed confrontations with anti-balaka militias, seemingly motivated by a desire for revenge.

In addition, the abuses committed by Seleka forces against the Christian population of Sibut during the Seleka's brief take-over of the town in late January 2014 underscore the volatility of the situation. Urgent measures are needed to prevent a further deterioration of the security situation and ensure the protection of the civilian population in large parts of the country.

ATTACKS IN BAORO

The killing of more than 100 Christian civilians by Seleka fighters and armed Muslim civilians on 22 January in the small town of Baoro, a trading centre some 390km northwest of the capital, is illustrative of this pattern. The attack took place at a time of growing tensions as negotiation between the two sides had broken down and armed confrontation seemed unavoidable. No international peacekeepers were stationed in the town at the time, even though the Seleka unit that had previously been posted in Baoro had abandoned the town two days earlier, creating a dangerous power vacuum.

Until recently, Baoro had a sizeable Muslim community that was, by some estimates, larger than its Christian community. Rumours began to circulate in December 2013 that anti-balaka forces were going to attack the town and slaughter the Muslims, leading many Muslims to flee in December and early January. When Seleka forces left the town on 20 January, Muslims feared that an anti-balaka attack was imminent.

Aladi Bouba, a prominent Muslim trader, tried to prevent the attack by negotiating with the anti-balaka militia that were surrounding the town. "I did everything I could," he told Amnesty International. "They threatened to attack the town in the morning unless we paid a large ransom, so I tried to negotiate the ransom with them."

Bouba, age 72, spent the day after the Seleka left trying to accommodate the demands of the anti-balaka militias. After a fruitless day of negotiating using Christian go-betweens, he drove outside of Baoro and then walked into the bush to negotiate with the anti-balaka commanders in person. According to Bouba, there were 12 separate groups of anti-balaka and each one wanted 3 million CFA in payment: a total of 36 million CFA (approximately £45,000). They also insisted on receiving the money by 3am the next morning.

Bouba said it was impossible for Baoro's Muslim community to come up with such a large sum so quickly. He tried to offer the anti-balaka two million CFA (approximately £2,500), but the anti-balaka commanders refused to take it. Negotiations ended at 11pm on 21 January, with Bouba telling the anti-balaka that he would bring their offer back to the Muslim community in Baoro to discuss. "If I had directly refused their offer," Bouba told Amnesty International, "they would have killed me right there."

That same day, thousands of Christians who lived in the town fled their homes fearing a Muslim attack, many of them hiding in the bush. Some 1,500-2,000 Christian civilians went to Baoro's Catholic mission to take refuge.

The anti-balaka attack commenced at 6am the following morning. "We heard lots of shooting early in the morning," a Red Cross staff member told Amnesty International. The combat between anti-balaka fighters and armed Muslim residents of Baoro lasted 30-45 minutes, during which time some 17 Muslim civilians were killed. One of the most prominent victims was the imam of the central mosque, Malum Gibrila, about 45 years old. Other victims included Mal Sule, a very old marabout (religious teacher), and Ahmed Alim, a neighborhood chief. Nearly all of those killed were unarmed civilians; at least one of the victims was a woman. Anti-balaka fighters also set fire to numerous Muslim homes.

Badly armed and equipped, the anti-balaka fighters were unable to take over the town. After the anti-balaka militia retreated, armed Muslims embarked a large-scale killing spree against Christian civilians who had stayed in the town. According to several Muslim residents of Baoro, many Muslims believed that their Christian neighbours had assisted the anti-balaka forces, providing information and support; they also said that some Christians in Baoro belonged to anti-balaka militias and took part in the attack. Such claims of victims' "cooperation with the enemy" are invariably made by both sides to justify their attacks on civilians.

Young Muslim men began going house to house searching for Christian residents and setting

their houses on fire. Some of the town's Christians were brought back to the main square and interrogated about their knowledge of the anti-balaka attack before being killed. A Muslim messenger also drove to Carnot, a nearby town that still had a Seleka presence, to request the Seleka to return; a Seleka contingent came back to Baoro that afternoon.

Seleka and Muslim residents of Baoro then killed at least 100 Christians in the town, most of them unarmed. Among the dead were Papito Ponanti, age 42, who was burned alive when his house was set on fire; Joseph Beina, age 23, whose body was badly mutilated, and Salomon Mbonte, who was shot at home. Seleka fighters also shot at or toward the Catholic church compound, terrifying the people taking refuge there and causing a group of young men to jump over the back wall to escape. The body of one of the men, Christian Behoro, age 28, was later found by national Red Cross volunteers; he had been shot and mutilated.

Denis Waka, a 50-year-old nurse, and his 15-year-old son Vivien barely survived the slaughter. They both have large machete wounds on the head and other parts of the body. Denis' 18-year-old son Polycarpe was killed.

Denis told Amnesty International:

I was at home, in the Mamadu district of town, with two of my children; the other two had fled to the bush and the three of us were also going to the bush; it was about 3pm. We were taken by a mixed group of Seleka, armed Peulhs and other armed Muslim civilians. They took us to the Carrefour [crossroad, in the centre of town]; there were another 10 people there who they had captured. They confused us with anti-balaka and they wanted to kill us all. They struck my son Polycarpe with machetes several times and killed him. Then they hit me and my younger son Vivien on the head and other parts of the body but a MISCA patrol passed nearby and many of them fled and so we seized the opportunity and also fled.

Pascal Kala, a 48-year-old health worker, barely survived the slaughter. On 21 January, the day before the anti-balaka attack, he sent his wife and children to take refuge in the church compound; he himself stayed at home to guard the house and the family's belongings. On 22 January, the day of the attack, armed Muslims came to his house four times over the course of the day, telling him to leave. "They told me that the Seleka are coming and that I'd better escape now," he said. "I refused. I told them, 'you guys know me.' The fourth time they came, they said, 'we know you but the Seleka don't know you; you should leave.'" Kala said that the armed Muslims burned about 15 houses in his neighborhood that day.

Seleka fighters visited Kala's neighborhood the next morning. Kala saw them enter the house of one of his neighbors and pull the man out, hitting him in the back with a machete. "The dead man was a Catholic," Kala said. "His name was Jean-Claude Nganabeyam. After they hit him with a machete another Seleka shot him twice. Then the Seleka pulled out a big knife and stabbed him several times, killing him."

"All this happened in front of my eyes," Kala told Amnesty International. "I was terrified and upset. I knew if I stayed at home I'd die."

Kala decided to risk fleeing to the Catholic church compound, even though he feared being

caught and killed in the street. He slipped out of his house and made it outside the town, then approached the main street that leads to the church. There he saw two young Muslim men whom he vaguely knew; he greeted them. When they learned he was headed for the church they decided to accompany him. "We walked arm-in-arm together to the church. On the way I saw several bodies lying in the street. When we got to the church gate, I thanked them and they left."

During the days that followed, the anti-balaka militia surrounding the town called in reinforcements to mount a second attack. On 26 January, an Amnesty International delegation encountered a group of about 150 anti-balaka fighters about 5km south of Baoro. The commander of the group, who called himself Rodrigue D.S. (or Rodrigue "Decisive Solutions"), told Amnesty International that he was part of a group of reinforcements that had arrived from Ouham Pende county (further to the north), and that his group was supporting the local anti-balaka contingent.

When Amnesty International delegates returned on 28 January they found the last Muslims packing up and fleeing the town. Some Muslims, nearly all displaced Peulh from the surrounding areas, could not afford to pay for transport; about 2-3,000 of them took refuge in the Catholic church compound. Only a small number of Muslims remained in the town; nearly all of the houses were empty. It was only then, more than a week after the Seleka's departure, that a small contingent of MISCA troops was stationed in the town to protect the displaced civilians at the church.

The following day anti-balaka forces reportedly took over the town, engaging in widespread looting and pillaging. Amnesty International has not been able to confirm whether this second attack resulted in injuries or deaths.

ATTACKS IN BATA

The Seleka were facing aggressive challenges by anti-balaka militias at the end of December-early January, and carried out a particularly vicious series of attacks on Christian communities perceived as supporting such groups. The following case typifies a larger pattern.

In the early morning of 31 December 2013, some 24 Christian residents of Bata, a village 7km from Bozoum (some 400 km northwest of the capital), were killed, and several others injured by Seleka forces and armed Muslim residents of nearby communities. Among those killed were several boys, including a blind 16-year-old; a 10-year-old who was shot while carrying his younger brother, who was injured; a 12-year-old who was hiding at his aunt's, and two 15-year-olds who were attacked and killed together with their older brothers.

A young woman, Rebecca Inza, was also killed in the attack. Her charred body and that of her brother, David, were found in their burned down home.

The initial intended target of the attack seems to have been a group of anti-balaka fighters who had set up camp at the northern entrance of the village a few days earlier, against the wishes of villagers who feared the anti-balaka presence would put them at risk of Seleka attacks. The anti-balaka militia had converged on the area from villages further north and

were demanding that Seleka forces based in the nearby town of Bozoum leave the region, threatening to attack the Seleka if they did not leave. Attempts at mediation between the two sides were ongoing when Seleka forces and some of their allies from Muslim communities attacked the village, seemingly looking for anti-balaka militia members but in fact targeting any male they could find in the area of the village closer to the anti-balaka camp. In the meantime, the anti-balaka fighters from the camp had fled, leaving the villagers to bear the brunt of the attack.

Mothers and wives of the victims and other female residents who witnessed the killings told Amnesty International that the attackers accused their victims, even children, of belonging to anti-balaka militias before killing them.

The mother of Jasmin Dutte, a blind 16-year-old who was killed in the attack, told Amnesty International:

As soon as shooting was heard, about 5-5.30 am, my husband fled to the bush. Jasmin stayed at home with me and his three sisters, who are also blind. When the Seleka came into the house he told them he is blind and one of them believed him and left but the other said Jasmin was anti-balaka and insisted to take him outside. I was trying to stop him taking him Jasmin outside but he insisted and Jasmin told me 'let me go out mother so that when he sees my condition maybe he won't kill me', but as soon as he went outside the Seleka shot him dead.

A 37-year-old farmer who survived the attack told Amnesty International that he had been hiding under his bed when seven Seleka and Muslim civilians came to his home, dragged him out, accused him of being anti-balaka, and hit him with machetes on the head, back and arms. He managed to escape his captors' grip as they were momentarily distracted. The male villagers who did not manage to flee or hide were all killed.

The youngest victims were two boys aged 10 and 12. The mother of 10 year-old Jonas Gaissona told Amnesty International:

I was outside the house with the children and when we heard the shooting we rushed in. Jonas was carrying his younger brother, Andre-Herman, and as he got into the house and was by the window some men approached the house and shot through the window. A bullet hit Jonas in the right flank and went through his body and through the leg of Andre-Herman. When the shooting stopped I took the children to the village clinic but Jonas died shortly afterwards. Andre-Herman is still recovering from his injury.

Twelve-year-old Thierry Tenegera was killed at his aunt's house, where he was hiding with two neighbours, 15-year-old Jean-Jaques Ndikissi and his 20-year-old brother Emanuel. His aunt, Elodi Nzahimia, who witnessed their killing and that of another neighbour, told Amnesty International:

When the shooting started early in the morning, Thierry came running to my home with the two Ndikissi brothers. Shortly after two men in uniform and armed with war weapons [Kalashnikov rifles according to her description] came to the house and took

the three out and shot all three right there outside my house. One shot Thierry and the other shot the two Ndikissi brothers. They shot them all three in the abdomen, disemboweling them. Then two other men, one of them in uniform, went to the house of my neighbour Claude Zalague and dragged him out. Claude's mother tried to hold on to her son but one of the armed men hit her with a machete and she fell. They then hit Claude with machetes and then shot him the chest, killing him.

Zalague's mother, Alice, interviewed separately and with the machete wound still visible on her arm, gave a similar account of her son's killing.

Among the other victims were 15-year-old Sylvain Mobannemna, his brother Robert, 18, and their father, Luc. In the village, the children's mother, Ivette, told Amnesty International:

First, three armed men came to the house and took my husband away, one was a Seleka in uniform carrying a rifle [a Kalashnikov-type rifle according to her description] and the other two were dressed in civilian clothes. Then another group of three came. Two had rifles and came in and one who carried a bow and arrows stayed by the door, outside. The two grabbed Robert and took him out and beat him and struck him with a machete on his head and back and then shot him in the chest. They then did exactly the same with Sylvain. They killed them both in front of me and my four-year-old son. I later found out that those who took my husband away brought him to the house of the village chief and shot him dead there.

Bienvendu Gbate, a survivor who witnessed Luc Mobannemna's killing, told Amnesty International:

When I heard shooting I hid under the bed but they found me. Seven men, some in uniform and other in civilian clothes, came into my home and dragged me outside. They accused me of being with the anti-balaka and hit me with machetes on the head, back and arm and then I managed to escape and run to the home of the village chief. While I was hiding there they brought Luc. He managed to escape their grip and came running into the house but they followed him and shot him dead. I was hiding in the same room but they did not see me.

Amnesty International interviewed most of the victims' relatives who witnessed the killing of their loved ones, as well as other witnesses. The picture that emerged is that of a brutal attack that underscores how civilians have been bearing the brunt of spiraling inter-communal violence, with armed actors on both sides targeting civilians they accuse or suspect of cooperating with or supporting the "other side."

APPLICABLE INTERNATIONAL LAW

Both international human rights law (IHRL) and international humanitarian law (IHL) apply to the non-international armed conflict in CAR, involving the predominantly Muslim Seleka forces and the mostly Christian anti-balaka militias. As well, individuals who perpetrate certain serious violation of IHL or IHRL can be held criminally responsible under international criminal law.

CAR is a state party to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their two Additional Protocols of 1977, the principal IHL instruments. Many of the specific rules included in these treaties, and all of those set out below, in any event also form part of customary international humanitarian law and are thus binding on all parties to any conflict, including non-state armed groups. Violations of many of these rules may amount to war crimes.

A fundamental rule of international humanitarian law is that Parties to any conflict must at all times “distinguish between civilians and combatants”, especially in that “attacks must not be directed against civilians.” A similar rule requires parties to distinguish between “civilian objects” and “military objectives”. (In this report the term “civilians” refers to civilians who are not taking a direct part in hostilities.)

The CAR is a state party to some of the major international human rights treaties, which also apply in time of armed conflict. Of particular relevance to this report are IHRL provisions related to the prohibition of discrimination, the right to life, and the prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment.

Individuals, whether civilians or military, can be held criminally responsible for certain violations of international humanitarian law and grave abuses of human rights.

All states have an obligation to investigate and, where enough admissible evidence is gathered, prosecute genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes, as well as other crimes under international law such as torture, extrajudicial executions and enforced disappearances. Grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions (and Additional Protocol I) and most other serious violations of international humanitarian law are war crimes.

Certain acts, if directed against a civilian population as part of a widespread or systematic attack, and as part of a state or organizational policy, amount to crimes against humanity. Such acts include, among others, murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation or forcible transfer of population.

V. THE WAY FORWARD

Sadly, while the scale of the violence in the Central African Republic over the past year is unprecedented, the country has been in a human rights crisis for years. If it is to escape the violent quagmire into which it has sunk, both the international community and the national government will need to act immediately.

One hopeful counterpoint to the dire scenario outlined in this report has been the efforts of the new transitional president of the Central African Republic, Catherine Samba-Panza. During a visit to a Muslim area of Bangui on 1 February, President Samba-Panza publicly deplored the forced exodus of Muslims to Chad, stating that it contradicts the principles on which the country was built. She promised to ensure that the country’s security forces protect Muslims as well as Christians. But whether she and her newly-formed transitional government have the means to put this commitment into practice is far from clear.

Steps to restore security and the rule of law are urgently needed. At present, basic state institutions such as functioning police forces are largely absent. The plethora of unruly anti-balaka militias that have established themselves throughout the western half of the country are increasingly imposing their diktat on the local population. While the anti-balaka have to date mainly targeted Muslims, they have also started to commit abuses against members of other communities. Such practices are likely to become entrenched if not halted soon.

The main challenge in rebuilding the security forces, including the army and police, will be to ensure that they disband the many armed militias operating in the country—rather than working with such groups or adopting their practices. Reports that former members of the army, known as FACA (the Armed Forces of the Central African Republic), are regrouping in their barracks with anti-balaka militias raise concerns about the will and ability of these forces to bring the militias under control. The horrific lynching of a Muslim man by a group of soldiers on 5 February in Bangui, just minutes after a ceremony at which President Samba-Panza presided, underscores the challenges the country faces in reforming its military forces.

Contributing to the continuation of the most serious abuses is the total impunity in which they occur. None of the country's previous governments has ever delivered fair and impartial justice in response to human rights violations, even for serious crimes such as enforced disappearances, extrajudicial executions, and torture. At present, the lack of justice for serious crimes perpetuates the cycle of violence, as many seem convinced that the only way to punish the suspected perpetrators is to engage in illegal, vigilante action. Ending the reign of impunity—by properly investigating, prosecuting and punishing those responsible for serious violations—would do much to assuage inter-communal tensions and restore confidence in the rule of law.

By ratifying the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in 2001, the Central African Republic committed itself to ensuring that there would be no impunity for war crimes and crimes against humanity. If national authorities fail to investigate and prosecute the crimes that have been committed in the country, the ICC may step in. Notably, on 7 February 2014, the prosecutor of the ICC announced the initiation of a preliminary investigation into potential war crimes and crimes against humanity in the Central African Republic.¹⁷

RECOMMENDATIONS

To President Catherine Samba-Panza and the other members of the transitional government of the Central African Republic:

- Make it a priority, despite the precarious state of the country's security forces, to demobilise and disarm anti-balaka and Seleka fighters and to prevent de facto anti-balaka and Seleka control of cities, towns and villages, ensuring that anti-balaka militias and Seleka forces currently occupying military bases across the country are ejected from those bases.
- In reconstituting the armed forces and the police, ensure that anyone suspected of ordering or committing violations of international humanitarian law or human rights abuses is removed from the ranks, and that no members of anti-balaka militias or Seleka forces are allowed to join the armed forces or the police unless they have been appropriately vetted and have been given the necessary training, including in human rights protection.
- Publicly condemn the killing of civilians and of captured Seleka and other detainees, as well as looting and attacks on property, making clear that those suspected of committing, participating in or in any way facilitating such crimes will be brought to justice.
- Issue binding orders instructing members of the security forces that those failing to take the necessary action to prevent such crimes will be removed from the ranks and held accountable for dereliction of duty. Disseminate these instructions frequently and via a wide range of media to ensure that they reach as broad an audience as possible (including the security forces, armed militias, and members of the public at large).
- Continue to reach out to the Muslim community and reassure them of the state's firm commitment to protecting their security.
- Take prompt action to investigate, prosecute, and punish members of the armed forces involved in the public lynching of the man killed at a military ceremony in Bangui on 5 February. The outcome of the investigation and trial should be widely publicised so as to raise awareness that such attacks are crimes and will not go unpunished.
- Ensure that independent and impartial investigations are carried out into the widespread violations of international human rights and humanitarian law committed over the past year and that perpetrators are brought to justice in fair trials.
- Ensure the prompt reconstitution of the judiciary and other justice bodies, including courts, prisons, and prosecutorial agencies and seek international assistance and cooperation in ensuring the justice and security sectors can uphold human rights.
- Ensure that the relevant government institutions cooperate fully with the International Commission of Inquiry and other UN entities.

To the international community, and in particular the African Union (AU), the United Nations (UN), and the European Union (EU):

- Provide the African-led International Support Mission in the Central African Republic (MISCA) and other international peacekeeping forces with sufficient resources to enhance their capacity to rapidly deploy in all regions of the country in order to provide effective protection to the civilian population and prevent the commission of further attacks.
- Ensure that the available human and material resources of the peacekeeping forces are utilized in the most effective manner, in particular, that they are deployed to areas where civilians are most in need of protection such as in and around IDP sites and remote towns, and that they act promptly to prevent attacks against civilians.
- Put in place the necessary oversight mechanisms to ensure that peacekeeping forces do not commit or in any way participate or assist in the commission of human rights abuses; that allegations of peacekeeping forces' involvement in human rights abuses are promptly investigated; that the concerned forces are removed from their position pending the result of such investigations, and that any members of those forces found to have been responsible for abuses are held accountable.
- Immediately start contingency preparations and planning for the possible transformation of MISCA to a United Nations peacekeeping operation, as requested by Security Council resolution 2127 (2013).
- Ensure smooth coordination among all military forces present in CAR, including the MISCA, French forces (Sangaris), European forces, and the Moroccan forces that are protecting the UN.
- Expedite the deployment of the international commission of inquiry as decided in Security Council resolution 2127 (2013) to look into violations and abuses of international humanitarian law and international human rights law in CAR by all parties, in order to help identify the perpetrators and ensure that they are held accountable.

To armed groups and militias:

- Take concrete steps to ensure fighters respect international law, including by publicly condemning, from the highest level of leadership, all unlawful killings, attacks on civilians, forced displacement, destruction of homes, looting, and other human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law committed by their forces.
- Instruct their forces that such abuses will not be tolerated under any circumstances and those who commit such abuses will be held fully accountable.
- Remove from the ranks anyone suspected of responsibility for ordering or committing serious violations of international humanitarian law and human rights abuses.
- Cooperate with independent and impartial investigations into violations, including with the International Commission of Inquiry.

¹ Amnesty International is using this term to describe a “purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas.” (Report of the United Nations Commission of Experts Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 780 (1992), 27 May 1994, section III.B) As this briefing demonstrates, “ethnic cleansing” in CAR is being pursued through the commission of crimes against humanity and war crimes.

² Amnesty International, “None of Us Are Safe”: War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity in the Central African Republic, 19 December 2013, p. 2 (“If, as appears to be the case, the power of the ex-Seleka forces is waning, and anti-Muslim forces are gaining momentum, the minority Muslim community may be particularly at risk”).

³ Tanguy Berthemet, “Bozizé dénonce l’agression d’«étrangers terroristes,»” *Le Figaro*, 8 January 2013; Maharou Kanazoe, “Quand Bozizé joue avec le feu,” *Courrier International*, 7 January 2013; “Bozizé invite la jeunesse de la RCA à la prise de responsabilité face à Seleka,” *Radio Ndeke Luka*, 16 March 2013.

⁴ Christophe Châtelot, “À Bangui, les pro-Bozizé accusent les ‘Tchadiens,»” *Le Monde*, 7 January 2013.

⁵ See, for example, Amnesty International, “None of Us Are Safe”: War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity in the Central African Republic, AFR 19/013/2013, 19 December 2013; Amnesty International, Central African Republic: Human Rights Crisis Spiralling out of Control, AFR 19/003/2013, October 2013; Human Rights Watch, “I Can Still Smell the Dead”: The Forgotten Human Rights Crisis in the Central African Republic, September 2013. The formal dismantling of the Seleka in September 2013 had no meaningful impact on their activities. Amnesty International will refer to them as the Seleka (rather than the “ex-Seleka”) in this report.

⁶ The Peulh are a traditionally nomadic ethnic group spread across West and Central Africa. They are generally Muslim, and quite numerous in the Central African Republic, though some are now sedentary, living permanently in towns and villages. Some ethnic Peulhs joined with the Seleka to attack civilians. See, for example, Joanne Mariner, “Tit-for-tat atrocities in the Central African Republic,” *LiveWire*, 11 December 2013.

⁷ See, for example, International Crisis Group, Central African Republic: Priorities of the Transition, Africa Report N°203, 11 June 2013, p. 20.

⁸ See Amnesty International, “None of Us Is Safe”: War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity in the Central African Republic, AFR 19/013/2013, 19 December 2013. (The slaughter was carried out in retaliation for a daring anti-balaka attack on Bangui in the early morning of 5 December.)

⁹ UN Security Council resolution 2127 (2013). Since then, the Security Council has also approved an additional European Union force, expected to consist of 500-600 troops. UN Security Council resolution 2134 (2014). Both resolutions were adopted under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, reflecting the Security Council’s view that the crisis in the Central African Republic threatened the peace and security of the region.

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Council's view that the crisis in the Central African Republic threatened the peace and security of the region.

¹¹ According to the International Organization of Migration, over 52,000 migrants, refugees and third-country nationals have arrived in Chad from the Central African Republic in less than six weeks. IOM Chad, Influx from the Central African Republic (CAR) update, 5 February 2014. In addition, hundreds of vehicles full of Muslims left Bangui to Chad escorted by Chadian soldiers on 7 February 2014.

¹² The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) defines crimes against humanity as certain criminal acts, including murder, torture, and persecution, that are "committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack." Forced population transfers, forced deportation, and persecution are also among the specific crimes that qualify as crimes against humanity under the Rome Statute (if committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack).

Intentionally directing attacks against civilians not taking direct part in hostilities, or against civilian objects, is a war crime. ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 156. See also Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, articles 8(2)(b)(i) and (ii), and 8(2)(e)(i)(ii)(iv) and (xii).

¹³ Report of the United Nations Commission of Experts Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 780 (1992), 27 May 1994.

¹⁴ The group stopped bring back the bodies after about 22 January, as the decomposing bodies were in such terrible shape that transporting them on hand-carried stretchers became difficult.

¹⁵ Like many rural Peulh women, Mariam uses only one name.

¹⁶ Media Coulibaly, "Soldiers lynch man at army ceremony in Central African Republic," Reuters, 5 February 2014.

¹⁷ Statement of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, Fatou Bensouda, on opening a new Preliminary Examination in Central African Republic, 7 February 2014.

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