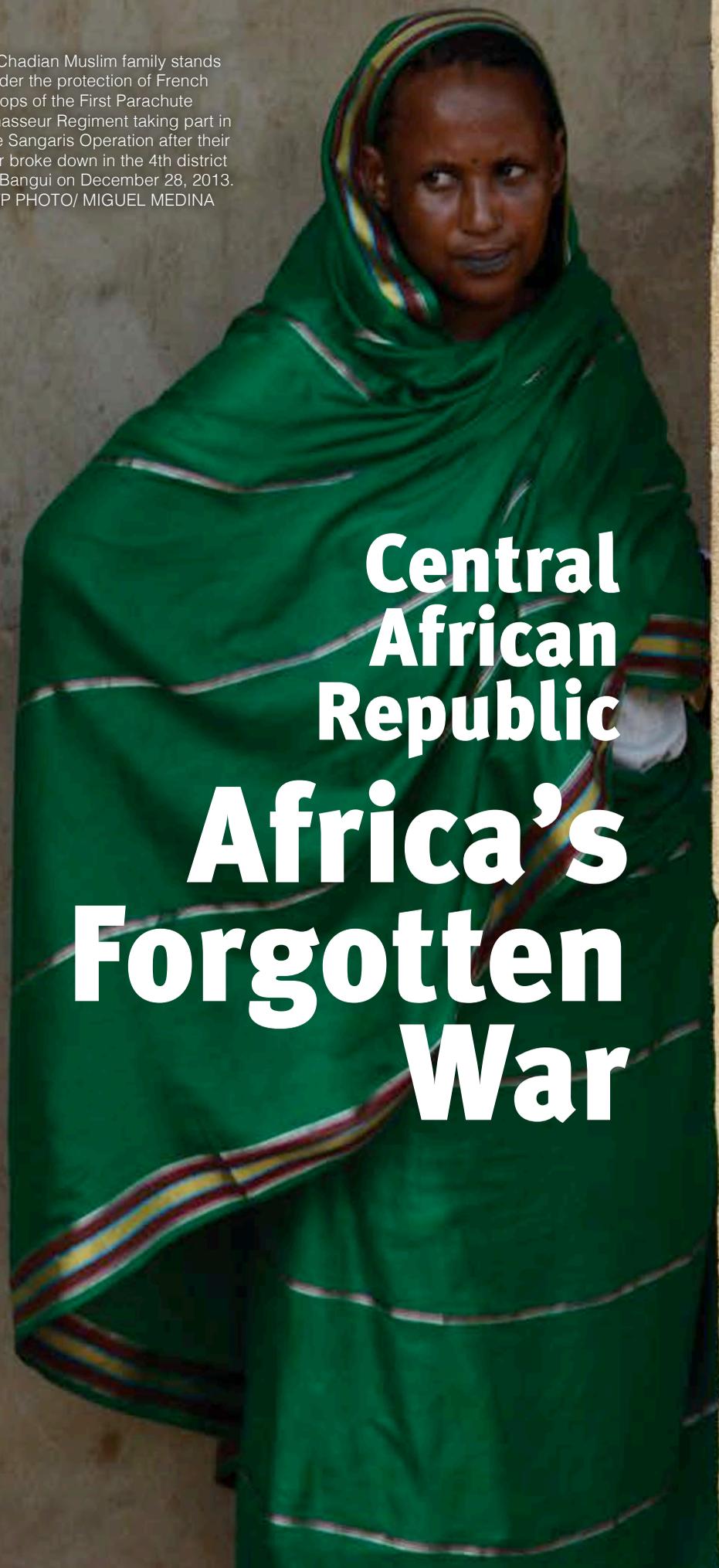


A Chadian Muslim family stands under the protection of French troops of the First Parachute Chasseur Regiment taking part in the Sangaris Operation after their car broke down in the 4th district of Bangui on December 28, 2013. AFP PHOTO/ MIGUEL MEDINA

**Central
African
Republic**
**Africa's
Forgotten
War**





Pullo families wait after arriving at a centre for displaced muslims fleeing the anti-balaka militia, in Yaloke, some 200 km east of Bangui, on May 4, 2014. The centre is run by the NGO Caritas Centrafrique and the Catholic church. About a quarter of the Central African population of 4.6 million have fled their homes since the start of the ethno-religious conflict. AFP PHOTO / ISSOUF SANOGO

MODERN CONFLICTS

A sectarian war erupted in the Central African Republic when Muslim rebels overthrew the government of President François Bozizé in 2013, amid widespread violence. The conflict continues unabated with little international media coverage, but time is running out. OLGA YOLDI writes.

While the world's attention is focused on the Islamic State attacks in Syria and Iraq and on Boko Haram in Nigeria, few in the Western world would have heard of, let alone be able to locate the Central African Republic (CAR).

Some may know of a conflict that has left one million people (a quarter of the population) internally displaced, 68,000 refugees, an estimated 140,000 people dead, an economy destroyed and worrying levels of instability and insecurity. And while the situation is not quite as dire as in 2013, the atmosphere remains tense and unpredictable. Although a number of peace building attempts have been made at various times, no resolution has been reached, and the country continues to be gripped by violence and lawlessness.

Little literature exists on the CAR, a landlocked country in Central Africa spanning 623,000 square kilometres, and a population of 4.4 million people, where Muslims make up about 17 percent of the predominantly Christian state.

The CAR fared particularly badly even as a French colony as well as from the Arab slave trade, and according to Eric G Burman, from the Small Arms Survey, it received less attention and resources from France than the other French territories.

“The Arab slave trade raids from Chad and Sudan led to a severe decline in the population in CAR,” Burman wrote in a report. “With ramifications for development as well as ongoing ethnic and religious tensions and successive governments kept their armed forces and police relatively small and poorly armed.” Since independence the CAR has endured five coups, cyclical chaos and poor governance. While it is rich in resources, with forests, gold, diamonds, timber, oil and uranium, CAR is one of the world's poorest countries and remains largely underdeveloped due to instability, and a chronic lack of both economic development and infrastructure.

It is surrounded by troubled states and porous borders such as Chad, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Republic of Congo and Cameroon. It has attracted warlords such as Joseph Kony, the leader of a cult-like militia from Uganda, and tyrants like Jean-Bédél Bokassa - the self-crowned emperor accused of cannibalism that ruled the country with an iron fist from 1965 to 1993, torturing and killing political rivals.

The current conflict was triggered a decade ago when François Bozizé came to power following a coup that ousted President Ange-Félix Patassé who had been democratically elected. This triggered the African Bush War.

In 2013 Bozizé was also ousted by a loose coalition of Muslim rebel groups called Séléka (meaning ‘alliance’). Backed by Chad and armed with guns and rocket launchers, they gained control of the north, centre and the capital, Bangui. According to press reports, their ranks included Chadian and Sudanese mercenaries and inmates freed from Bangui's main prison, who attacked Christians and looted villages.

Michel Djotodia, the Séléka leader, appointed himself interim president of the Transitional National Authority. He promised to write a new constitution and conduct elections in 18 months. He officially dissolved the Séléka fighters, but proved incapable of restraining them.

Some Séléka were integrated into the army, others refused and ran wild over large parts of the country committing mass atrocities, killing Christians, raping women, burning villages and people alive and looting, according to a Human Rights Watch report.

Their brutality sparked retribution when Christian vigilantes, known as antibalaka, rose to retaliate against

the Muslim Séléka giving these a pretext for yet more aggression. According to John Lee Anderson from *The New Yorker*, the antibalaka militias were far more vicious than the Séléka and less organised “...The antibalaka's goal grew from simple reprisal against Séléka to ridding the country of Muslims entirely.”

Soon the antibalaka gained the upper hand and Muslims became the target of vicious sectarian attacks. Many fled to surrounding countries, others are still trapped in enclaves, too afraid to come out. Before the war an estimated 700,000 Muslims were living in the CAR, now fewer than 90,000 remain.

In 2013 a UN report warned the CAR was on the brink of genocide. UN High Commissioner of Human Rights, Antonio Guterres spoke about “a humanitarian catastrophe of unspeakable proportions” and warned that the CAR's Muslims were facing massive ethno-religious cleansing.

The violence fuelled a humanitarian crisis. According to human-rights organisations, thousands of civilians were left without access to food or healthcare and the lack of security prevented aid agencies from providing humanitarian assistance.

Both the Séléka coalition and the antibalaka militias continued to rip the country apart. Due to the increasing violence, in January 2014 Djotodia stepped down under international pressure. But his departure triggered even more violence.

He was hastily replaced by Bangui's former mayor Catherine Samba-Panza as the new interim president. She promised to make the government more inclusive, end the violence and call for elections in a year. But her attempts to bring peace have so far failed.

Since the conflict started the responsibility to pacify the country fell on peacekeepers. The challenge of disarming the Séléka, containing the antibalaka and protecting the Muslim minorities may have been underestimated by the international community. By the time they established a real presence in the capital a large number of the Muslims had already fled.

Initially 2000 African Union (AU) peacekeeping troops were sent to CAR, and as the killing intensified troops were increased. But the CAR is a large country and they could not control the fighting.

The AU peacekeeping operation was soon followed by the African led International Support Mission in CAR (MISCA) that included troops from Burundi, Rwanda, Chad, Gabon, Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon and DRC. But MISCA remained passive in the face of violence. Member states of the



Central African Republic interim President Catherine Samba-Panza gives a press conference concerning the Bekou EU trust fund for the Central African Republic, in Brussels, on May 26, 2015. AFP PHOTO / EMMANUEL DUNAND

European Union's EUFOR (Finland, Estonia, Romania, Latvia and others) also began sending troops.

In December 2013 the French President, François Hollande sent 1200 soldiers to secure M'Poko airport where thousands of Christians had sought shelter. He said the French intervention would be short, calling the soldiers Sangaris, after a Central African butterfly that has a brief life. In April 2014 France voted to increase its presence to 4000 men.

They shared a mandate to help protect civilians, stabilise the country and restore state authority over the territory, as well as create conditions conducive to the provision of humanitarian assistance. But according to press reports, a lack of resources and disunity between the different contingents hampered their ability to contain the violence.

In 2014 Chadian peacekeepers withdrew from the CAR following accusations of human-rights abuses during fighting that killed 24 and injured over 100. Congolese units were also accused of committing human-rights abuses against civilians, including torture, killing and detentions and had refused to cooperate with other MISCA contingents, while members of the

Cameroonian deployment due to wage arrears, refused to cooperate at all.

While all MISCA troops were coordinated by a multinational operational commander, General Martin Toumeta Chomu of Cameroon, each African contingent had the scope to act independently on the ground.

According to the African Arguments Online, this was partly due to the changing nature of the conflict which required situational reaction, but also because orders came from the individual national commanders of each of the contributing countries, rather than from coordinated international terms of engagement.

In February 2014 Amnesty International released a report in which it accused international peacekeepers of having failed to prevent the ethnic cleansing of Muslim civilians in the western part of CAR. The report said that several Muslim localities were now completely empty of Muslims.

President Hollande warned that the conflict in CAR was on the verge of Somalisation and pressed the UN for a mandate. But the UN was hesitant to involve itself in the conflict due to budget cuts and a reluctance for direct intervention, according to press reports.

In September 2014 the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) was deployed under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, and officially replaced MISCA. Twelve thousand peacekeepers landed in Bangui. They are still there. Their mandate has been renewed for the next five years.

Like MISCA, the MINUSCA commander does not have control over contributing contingents. While the UN's role is to authorise and advise the collective intervention force, it cannot ensure adherence to the mandate or create a sense of unity among the ranks.

It shares a mandate to help protect civilians, support the transition process, facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance, protect human rights, support national and international justice and the rule of law, and provide for disarmament, demobilisation, reintegration and repatriation.

Critics say MINUSCA is underfunded and ineffective at fulfilling such a large and complex mandate. Mathew Mitchell from the Journal of Diplomacy, attributes the failure of past UN peacekeeping missions to the vagueness of the Chapter VII mandate, which according to him, often leads to UN peacekeepers acting as nothing more than hapless bystanders. "The failure of these missions is not only due to the limitations of Chapter VII", he adds. "But also the commitment of troops and resources – or lack thereof – from developed nations."

Like AU and MISCA, all MINUSCA's contingents come from developing countries. They shoulder the burden of most peacekeeping missions in Africa, and tend to be inadequately trained and ill-equipped for their mission.

Canadian Lieutenant-General Romeo Dallaire, the commander of the Rwandan peacekeeping mission, spoke about receiving assistance in the form of flashlights without batteries or bulbs, inoperable and or antiquated armoured personnel carriers, and troops lacking weapons and training.

Despite the peacekeepers' presence, neither side has given up the fight. Armed groups are still controlling the country and moving freely among the population, while disarmament efforts have had little effect so far.

The UN insists the peacekeepers have neutralised the fighters. "What we haven't done yet is stop the suffering of the people of the CAR, or succeed in being

everywhere, which means that, on any given day, people are still being targeted for nothing more than their religious identity," Samantha Power, the US ambassador to the UN said.

France is now scaling down its mission. There are fears that when peacekeepers leave the situation will deteriorate and CAR will simply fall apart. It is quite clear by now that the UN alone will not provide a lasting solution to CAR's problems and neither will the government, which has become part of the problem rather than the solution.

Attempts at peace building have been unsuccessful so far. The fractured nature of the leadership structures makes it hard for any peace deal to be enforced by the various factions and the divisions within factions. Since the war started each faction has been working to consolidate their own economic and military power on a local basis and there are simply too many power brokers and too many interests at play.

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As soon as a peace deal is signed leaders of rival factions reject it and new violence breaks. "They come here and say they want to reconcile but the minute they leave they show just the opposite," Antoinette Montaigne, Minister of National Reconciliation told *The New Yorker*. The absence of a national army, reliable infrastructure and

institutions as well as an established government will no doubt hinder progress towards resolution.

Samba-Panza has tried different strategies to stabilise the country. In an effort to form a more inclusive government, she forced her cabinet to resign and appointed a Muslim prime minister, the country's first, who was allowed to name a few Séléka officials as ministers. But they were expelled by the leaders of the main Séléka army.

In spite of widespread insecurity, she has called for elections for August this year. Abdoulaye Mar Dieye, head of the African bureau at the UN Development Program said parliamentary and presidential elections were vital to restart development and offer traumatised people hope for the future.

"We have to have those elections because you cannot have a protracted transition," he said.

But critics say elections will achieve little. "None of the problems will go away just because elections are



People pray as they bury 16 coffins in the muslim cemetery of the PK16 district of Bangui on December 11, 2013. The father of a slain French soldier has described how disarmed Muslim fighters in the Central African Republic were lynched by a Christian mob in harrowing testimony that raised the spectre of a new wave of sectarian killing in the troubled state. AFP PHOTO / FRED DUFOUR

held,” said Thierry Vircoulon from the International Crisis Group. “Only after restoring security and the reconstruction of key state functions as a priority.”

Critics also say her government has not pushed hard enough for reconciliation and inclusion. “Score settling and positioning for the next election remains the chief preoccupations of most politicians in the capital,” Vircoulon said.

There is no doubt that re-establishing the rule of law and addressing impunity are now the biggest challenge and the highest priority for the transitional government. Both the Séléka and antibalaka militias are responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity. In 2014 the International Criminal Court (ICC) opened an investigation into allegations of murder, rape and the recruiting of child soldiers.

Last March the government began discussions on a draft law to create a special criminal court within the national judicial system that would include national and international judges and would complement the work of the ICC to try those responsible for grave

crimes and address impunity.

The massive influx of small arms into many parts of the country is the biggest threat to national security, law and order, according to a Small Arms Survey report. “The belief that weapons are necessary for self-defence has become widespread among civilians,” the report said. An effective disarmament campaign is therefore needed not only for militias but also for civilians.

Outside the capital where MINUSCA’s presence is sparse, the situation is even more volatile. Disputes between farmers and pastoralists over land, water and cattle have exacerbated old conflicts and created new ones.

Farmers tend to be mostly Christians and are perceived to be associated with the antibalaka, while herders are predominantly Muslims and are seen to be linked with the Séléka. Both militias have engaged in criminal activities including extortion and looting, causing poverty, destruction and suffering on civilians who in many cases are forced to flee.

According to an International Crisis Group briefing, the antibalaka have been stealing cattle and often killing the owners. They have also established control over the roads so they could extort livestock dealers. According to the briefing, Sélékas have also done well out of the cattle trade. “Séléka personnel play the role of armed tax collectors and make regular visits to extort pastoralists ... they take over the administration of towns, occupying customs and police infrastructure.”

In the absence of an effective government, or traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms, local communities have taken laws onto their own hands. Many young pastoralists have joined militia groups seeking retribution, while others have crossed the border and taken refuge in Cameroon and Chad.

The International Crisis Group’s briefing say these clashes form a conflict within a conflict away from the international spotlight and the attention of the transitional government. They are causing the collapse of the livestock farming sector, the radicalisation of some pastoralist groups and the blockage of transhuman movements between CAR and Chad and pastoralists are turning to banditry in order to survive.

Séléka militias also control the diamond rich areas in the western part of the country as well as national parks where poaching is prevalent. According to press reports, the diamonds and ivory are smuggled into neighbouring countries before being exported around the world and the revenues are used to finance the war – buy weapons and pay and equip soldiers and mercenaries.

For decades revenues generated from diamond industry were used to enrich those in power instead of advancing the country’s economic development. Government corruption led to mismanagement of high-value resources: diamonds, gold, wildlife, including elephants, ivory and timber.

In 2011 the World Bank estimated that diamonds sold in the informal market could represent between one quarter and one half of the national production. Diamond smuggling has increased since the war. Unfortunately the lack of effective government regulation and oversight for these resources has led to widespread illegal exploitation.

Stopping banditry and ending the illegal exploitation

of natural resources are essential to restore security and end the war. Natural resources (agriculture, mining, timber wild life and pastoralism) are the backbone of the CAR’s economy and they have the potential to become the engine of economic recovery and growth.

Tax revenues from regulated markets could help finance public services, nation building projects and create much needed employment. The government will need the financial and technical support of the international community to build institutional capacity, develop adequate legal frameworks and transparent and accountable systems of governance that will be free of corruption and patronage.

Only transparent and accountable systems in the allocation of natural resources revenues will reduce the structural inequalities, which are the root causes of the current conflict.

Inclusive peacebuilding initiatives on the other hand are vital to ease tensions, foster a sense of community and social cohesion. This could be promoted by creating projects for cooperation among factions and re-establishing relationships between the government and the wider community.

People’s involvement and inclusion specially of young people is vital to rebuild the country, where unemployment is running at over 20 percent and 60 percent of young people live in extreme poverty. Efforts to reintegrate ex-combatants are also essential.

“A critical message to give the world about the CAR is the risk of radicalisation. Poverty, the massive displacement, and disenfranchisement due to displacement will only make matters worse,” said Chaloka Beyani, UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons.

“If marginalisation, extreme poverty and lack of development are not addressed we’ll see another front by Nigeria’s Boko Haram or a similar group emerge, we need to take the steps now,” he said.

Indeed prolonging the chaos and suffering will only make matters worse and the CAR will continue to struggle with poverty, malnutrition and banditry. Time is running out. A genuine engagement from the international community, cooperation and restorative approaches are urgently needed to bring healing and peace to this broken nation. **R**

Stopping banditry and ending the illegal exploitation of natural resources are essential to restore security and end the war.