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CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC MATTERS: CHANGES NEEDED TO BUILD PEACE

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Endemic violent conflict, kleptocratic elites, generations with at best intermittent schooling, thousands of women dying in childbirth each year: even this partial list of the Central African Republic's (CAR) challenges can make the country's plight seem hopeless. It is not. However, changing things will require greater honesty about the extent of what is needed than has generally been offered. In particular, arriving at a more peaceful and prosperous CAR demands not just policy change – though that is necessary, too – but behavioral and institutional change that everyone who claims an interest in a more prosperous CAR will have to participate in. In this note, we first outline the situation that Central Africans and outsiders with a stake in the country are facing. We then suggest a range of approaches that could improve the life chances of the millions of Central Africans who have been struggling for far too long.

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The Central African Republic lies exactly where its name implies: at the geographic center of the African continent. Since the era of official and territorialized European colonialism (approximately 1890–1960), CAR has been more of an aspirational country than a fully realized one. It covers a vast geographic area (about the size of the U.S. state of Texas) but has a small population (about five million people, though the statistics are not precise), and a very small government budget. Being a remote, landlocked, and isolated country with little money and few people has made it difficult for leaders to create any meaningful social contract; instead, the various actors and institutions that have sought authority and privilege have found violence and coercion to be expedient tactics to mobilize people – or to cow them. The neighborhood has not helped: most of CAR's neighbors – Chad, Sudan, South Sudan, Cameroon, and the Democratic Republic of Congo – have been dealing with their own dynamics of seemingly intractable armed conflict and frustrated life chances for their citizens. Armed actors from these neighboring countries have played key roles in exacerbating the more home-grown dynamics of violence in CAR.

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CAR is often referred to as a “forgotten conflict,” and while it is true that it does not have the attention-grabbing power of better-known countries, it is also the case that international peacebuilding, development, and humanitarian assistance have expanded substantially in the country over the past decade. Diplomats and other interveners and Central Africans alike have found it expedient to continue to interact using colonial patterns. Central African governments have deferred responsibility for vision and planning to outside interveners; when the proposals prove unworkable or implementation is lackluster, interveners and government officials blame each other for the failures. When agreements are breached, accountability is rare. Therefore, the persistent problems in CAR seem less a matter of lack of attention and more one of lack of accountability and need for changes in behavior.

Suggestions: less colonialism and more integrity, in the following forms.

- **A real ceasefire.** This must be led by the government. The United Nations Integrated Mission that has operated in the country since 2014 must develop the diplomatic credibility and the real ability to ensure it is adhered to, both by the government and armed groups.
- **Local peace agreements.** These are not panaceas, but they can decrease the violence and disruption people experience on localized basis.
- **International peacebuilding** focused on preventing violence. One way to do that is to curtail cross-border problems.
- **Government responsibility** for vision and planning in matters of development and citizen inclusion. For their part, diplomats and donors should support national and local governments when these plans focus on decentralization and addressing the drivers of conflict – but also pull back when the government’s vision contravenes international norms or terms previously agreed upon.
- **Decentralization**

This has been a much-touted goal in CAR for more than fifteen years. It has also been expensive, and the country has little to show for it. However, there are exceptions, such as the Village Conservation Zones scheme supported by the EU-funded conservation program, ECOFAC. Decentralization is not impossible, but the decentralization process itself needs to be decentralized.

The focus should be less on decentralizing government ministries and more on infrastructure (finances, telecoms, roads) and localized mechanisms for accountability (accounting transparency, local taxation, jobs).

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PRESENT

Oubangui-Chari, the poorest and most neglected of France’s African colonies, became the independent CAR in 1960. The new government elite perpetuated the anti-peasant ignorance of the colonizers who preceded them and generally ignored people’s needs¹. Jean-Bédél Bokassa took power in a coup in 1965, and while his rule became increasingly autocratic and erratic, he also strove to make his vision of Central African grandeur real. His legacy remains visible today in the form of the university and television station (both of which were the first of their kind in the region), and in the modernist ministries and other government edifices he built. During that period, Central Africans identified many things that they needed to work on (for instance, expanding the educational system and

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making it more responsive to Central African realities), but activists and intellectuals found these to be stimulating rather than insurmountable problems. CAR was a site of in-migration, particularly by Muslim merchants and businesspeople who saw the country as a good place to make money and raise families. It is helpful to pause over this not-so-distant past because it indicates how far the country has fallen (and how quickly) and suggests that what now is seen by some as a basket-case of a country was not always that way and could again change.

The intervening decades have been dire. The Central African economy contracted massively in the 1980s and 1990s. Foreign assistance (primarily from France) declined as well, and international donors pushed for multi-party democracy. The result was political violence, first in the form of army mutinies and then coup attempts. In March 2003, General François Bozizé seized power in the capital, Bangui, with the help of a force of primarily Chadian men-at-arms mobilized by Chadian president Idriss Déby. Road robbery and hostage-taking had been problems in rural CAR for years, and after 2004 people in northwestern CAR expanded the defense groups, they had organized to combat them. Those groups soon clashed with government forces in the area as well, and CAR's first modern rebellions were born.

There followed a decade of peacebuilding, humanitarian interventions, and development assistance. At the same time, armed groups continued to form, as a means for rural people to express discontent with their lot (though they actually made life harder for their fellow residents) and/or for sidelined political elites to bolster their case for a return to prominence. Rebellion and President Bozizé narrowing the circle of his elite beneficiaries characterized the period 2005 to 2013, and these dynamics were accompanied by a cycle of peacebuilding interventions that did nothing to transform the exclusionary and violent political dynamics – quite the opposite. Indeed, in late 2012, a larger-than-ever and more-international-than-ever rebel coalition emerged, and despite attempts at peace talks this coalition, Seleka, took power in Bangui in March 2013. Seleka's disparate members ruled in ways that Central Africans found despotic and violent, and opposition quickly emerged. The many people who mobilized against them called themselves Anti-Balaka, but while they shared a name, they were more a social movement than a group. They had no overarching or uniting structure, and the dynamics of their formation, action, and support varied widely.

By late 2013 violence had become so intense that the African Union dispatched a peacekeeping mission, MISCA, which was converted in September 2014 into a United Nations Integrated Mission (meaning it had civilian, military, police, and military-observer components), known as MINUSCA. Since then, there has been a further cycle of rebellion/peacebuilding/government restructuring. Donor peacebuilding assistance has focused on reform of the security forces, disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration, as well as national political dialogues and other forms of post-conflict peacebuilding.

Two primary narratives have emerged about the country's status. One, heard often from the UN and donors in public and official settings, is that everything is improving. Violent conflict is down, and important steps toward peace and rebuilding are being taken. Another, heard from many Central Africans, is the opposite: people face ever more violent exactions, both from the Central African government, its Russian supporters, and armed groups, and they are struggling economically as much as ever. Three million Central Africans require humanitarian assistance, including the 1.4 million who have been displaced from their homes; those numbers have stayed fairly constant for nearly a decade. Central Africans feel abandoned, even as the UN/humanitarian presence in their midst has expanded.

Both narratives are correct – in part. For they are both also incomplete.

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Changes since Seleka's arrived on the scene:

- Various steps in the peacebuilding process have been taken, such as national dialogue, presidential elections, and the signing of a peace agreement in 2019.
- There are many more luxury apartments and hotels in Bangui.
- UN bases have an immense physical presence in many of the country's towns and cities.
- The CAR government receives military assistance from Russia, including in the form of Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group, and together they have regained control of many towns.
- Central Africans' ideas about nationality have become more restrictive and exclusionary.
- Religion, already a source of latent tension, has become a sharp social dividing line. Some re-integration has occurred, but the Christian/Muslim mistrust remains.
- Locally negotiated peace agreements have brought some stability to the areas in which they apply, at least for periods of time.

One of the biggest shifts was the arrival of Russian military aid to CAR at the end of 2017. Russian support gave the CAR government the hope that it could achieve a definitive military victory. The Central African Armed Forces have indeed re-taken towns outside the capital, but at a very high cost, namely a “growing tendency to stifle dissent and allegations of human rights abuses in the counter-insurgency campaign.”² Donor conditions and democratic stipulations became a façade since the government could obtain all the weapons and military hardware it wanted directly from Russia. Some promised international assistance never materialized, but not because the international partners withdrew it on principle; instead, the assistance was stalled because the government had not taken the planning and implementation steps required to release it. Government officials' priority was focused on maintaining their posts beyond the 2020 presidential elections. A new government narrative has also emerged about the need for Central Africans to decide their own fate, rather than following donor prerogatives that until now have not helped create the prosperity all say they aspire to. Meanwhile, there are dozens of peace agreement violations every day, according to the UN.



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WHAT NOW?

The situation in CAR is certainly not stagnant. But neither has there been the kind of transformation that nearly everyone had hoped for. The biggest losers have been ordinary Central Africans. While the material conditions of elites have improved, the displaced and the hungry remain, and food security seems if anything to be getting worse. Therefore, changing the status quo will require a different approach, one in which the various stakeholders agree to greater honesty – which means giving some things up in the interest of securing a better future for the many.

Specifically, a de-escalation in conflict could start with the government declaring a national ceasefire. Given the geography, history, population distribution, and factionalization in the country, it is not possible for any one side to “win” the armed conflict, and the attempt to do so has caused much suffering and death. The government could recognize this, and instead delegate authority and accountability to a more localized level. MINUSCA would need to adapt in this new environment as well. The international force could focus on preventing cross-border incursions of armed groups and bandits, ensuring physical security in areas where they operate, establishing local peace agreements, and monitoring ceasefires. International partners could pool their funds in a stability fund that focuses on addressing the drivers of conflict and supporting the local peace agreements.³ Until now, Central African citizens have seen too little difference between government soldiers, rebels, and other armed actors, with too many using their power to extract from and harass the population. A ceasefire with consequences for breaches could be the first block in a new relationship between Central Africans and their security sector, one founded on mutual respect.

International partners’ support to the government should recognize that the Weberian state they imagine they are playing a role in creating in CAR will start not in Bangui, but in the rural areas, with diligent and patient efforts to support real decentralization and violence reduction. Until now, most decentralization efforts have had little impact. They have focused on ministries or on projects such as rehabilitating buildings. Decentralizing power and money has generally proved much more sensitive, and hence subject to much more stalling. There are exceptions, but these have occurred through concerted negotiation at the local level rather than grand schemes. In the 2000s, for example, the EU-funded conservation program ECOFAC developed a system whereby villages in the vicinity of safari concessions could receive the bulk of the hunting taxes for use on local development projects. Though far from perfect, the devolved hunting revenues could nevertheless be a precedent upon which to build. For what is needed above all are local mechanisms for accountability and revenue generation. These might include local taxation schemes that are workable for the population and that bring tangible benefits; transparent accounting techniques; and job creation.

Again, there is precedent for locally accountable revenue generation. Many people in northwestern CAR grew cotton for sale until Chadian men-at-arms destroyed the cotton processing facility in 2003, and rebellion made road transport difficult. Until that time, cotton growers contributed to their locality’s cotton association, which used a portion of the revenues to help the needy and solve local problems (though not always democratically – see Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan⁴ for a portrait of this bygone mode of rural stability). The lesson here is that rather than assuming the solution to their ills will come from a far-off benefactor, rural and non-elite Central Africans must look to how they can generate sustainable revenue on a local basis and build from there.

Another arena that demands greater decentralization and localization is infrastructure, particularly financial infrastructure, telecommunications, electricity, and roads.

There is also a need for greater attention to youth. People aged 18–45 make up some 60 percent of the population, and most of them have only known their country as one wracked by violence, rebellion, and international intervention. Support and mentoring are crucial, particularly in the form of apprenticeships. Cash transfers in rural areas could also boost ever-needed job creation. Humanitarian and development agencies must acknowledge that they are often the main employers in these regions and take responsibility for creating jobs that carry a modicum of labor rights. Currently, they see job creation as ancillary to their role in providing humanitarian aid. But their impact is biggest in the “incentives” they offer to the “volunteers” who carry out their projects. Calling workers volunteers and paying them only a small tip of sorts is not honest, given that the aid system depends on these workers. Humanitarians should step up and accept the responsibilities that inhere in being the country’s largest economic sector.



CONCLUSION

CAR is not in the news every day, but neither has the plight of the country been ignored. In fact, CAR has received substantial amounts of international financial assistance, both direct humanitarian aid and support for the government. The country also hosts a large UN military mission. The government and armed groups have taken the steps in the peacebuilding toolkit that are designed to transition it from a country in conflict to a “post-conflict” status. Yet the troubles persist, primarily for the majority of Central Africans who barely have enough to subsist on, let alone to pay for luxuries like sending their children to school (assuming the schools are not shuttered, as they so often have been since the mid-1990s).

This situation can change, and policy shifts such as those outlined above are crucial. But the policy shifts must build on a shift in the ways people interact with each other in CAR. Policy is carried out by people, and it is people – government officials, donors, diplomats, villagers, members of armed groups, and even report-writers and researchers – who are on the hook in CAR. International partners lament breaches of the peace agreement in private but publicly laud the government and the armed groups’ commitment to peace; government officials make long speeches about development but take no steps to bring the donor monies to their constituencies; armed group members claim to be fighting for legitimate grievances but end up destroying their regions in the process. Central African villagers are exhausted by the toll of decades of unrest but see outsiders, rather than themselves, as the generators of solutions.

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For any policy change to work, people in all these categories will have to commit to greater integrity and honesty in how they interact with each other and take responsibility for their actions and failures. It is much easier to continue behaving today as we did yesterday, to perpetuate the wide divergence between our public statements and our private views and actions, and to insist on ceremony and protocol rather than honesty and high standards. But peace and prosperity hang in the balance, so it is urgently time to place on the agenda a change in the way.

Endnotes

1 Zocizoum, Y. 1984. *Histoire de la Centrafrique*, tome 2 (1959-1979). Paris: l'Harmattan

2 Bax, P. 2021. “Russia’s Influence in the Central African Republic,” *International Crisis Group*, 3 December 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/central-african-republic/russias-influence-central-african-republic>, accessed 17 February 2022.

3 The International Peace Information Services has conducted a detailed mapping of conflict: government v. rebels, rebels v. rebels, population, resources, etc. Together with the internal work of the UN, this mapping can serve to guide the de-escalation process, as well as to identify where to apply greater efforts in support of local peacebuilding and investment in cross-border projects.

4 Bierschenk, T. and J.-P. Olivier de Sardan. 1997. “Local Powers and a Distant State in Rural Central African Republic.” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 35(3): 441-468



Central African Republic

1894-1960 Colonial era & independence

Colonial rule



- 1894-1960, French colony
- From 1940s, Slight openings for participatory governance
- French use forced labour & hardened ethnic classification
- Sows seeds for exploitative rule and ethnic tensions

▽ Boganda

- 1958
CAR gains self-government under MESAN leader Boganda
- 1959
Boganda dies, nephew David Dacko succeeds him

▽ Dacko

- 1960
CAR gains full independence
- 1960-1964
Dacko rules CAR as a one-party state

1965-1979 Bokassa & Empire

- 1965 army commander Jean-Bedel Bokassa ousts Dacko in a coup
- 1972 declares himself emperor for life
- 1976 renames the country the Central African Empire
- 1979 the regime conducts serious violence against protesting children and teenagers



1979-2013 Series of coups & takeovers

Dacko ousts Bokassa in French-backed coup

1979



1981

Army commander Andre Kolingba ousts Dacko in coup

Ban on political parties lifted

1991



1992

Kolingba wins election but then results annulled

Ange-Felix Patasse wins election

1993



1996-7

Series of military mutinies

Patasse re-elected

1999



2003

Boize seizes Bangui and declares himself president, after 2 years of fighting

Unrest and insurgency takes hold, many forced to flee, multiple peacekeeping forces deployed

2003-2013



2011

Boize re-elected, with widespread suspicion of rigging

Muslim militia group Seleka seize power

2013



2013-2017 Seleka & collapse of the state

- 2013 Seleka leader Michel Djotodia sworn in as president
- 2014 Djotodia resigns & Catherine Samba-Panza takes over as interim leader
- 2015 New constitution passed, elections attempted but annulled
- 2016 Faustin-Archange Touadéra elected
- 2017 Violence intensifies and many aid agencies withdraw due to the danger



- Remaining state infrastructure totally destroyed
- Violence between Christian & Muslim militias escalates
- Many thousands displaced & sexual violence rampant

Present day



2020

Touadéra elected for 2nd term



Chronic violence still plagues CAR



An estimated 1.5 million people have been displaced by the conflict



An estimated 83% of the population live in poverty



At least 14 military groups are operating in CAR, including the Russian Wagner group

History of peace agreements

✳ 13 major peace agreements have been signed

- First: 2008 Libreville Global Peace Accord
- Signatories = 3 armed groups + government
- Latest: 2019 Khartoum Accord
- Signatories = 14 armed groups + government
- Guarantors = AU, Economic Community of Central African States
- Facilitators = UN, Angola, Cameroon, DRC, Congo, Gabon, Sudan, Chad, Equatorial Guinea

✳ Common features

- Each has failed to reach lasting peace
- Power-sharing increased over time
- Strategy of transition through disarmament not resolution
- Repeated breaches have not been reprimanded

Source: From Legatum Institute "Central African Republic: Towards a Roadmap to Peace", March 2022.