



The Central African Republic: a primer on the current crisis

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President Francois Bozize of the Central African Republic (CAR) was overthrown in March 2013 by a rebel coalition called Seleka, which then installed its leader, Michael Djotodia, as the new president. However, the country remained in turmoil and 'self-defence groups' opposed to Seleka, called Anti-Balaka, took up arms. By late 2013, senior UN officials were warning the conflict had turned into one between the Muslim minority, which was heavily represented in Seleka, and the Christian majority, represented in Anti-Balaka. They said there was a real danger of [genocide](#). The country's [population](#) of around five million people is estimated to be 50% Christian, 25% Muslim and 35% Animist. A high proportion of Muslims live in the north. But many experts caution against over-simplified narratives of 'Christian versus Muslim' and question claims of possible genocide.

The international community has deployed about 1600 French troops and 4400 (set to rise to 5500) African peace-keepers to stabilise the situation; 500 are due to be sent by the European Union, with the French scheduled to reduce their military presence on the ground. In January 2014, Djotodia was persuaded to stand-down as president and leave the country. He has been replaced as interim president by Catherine Samba-Panza, a well-respected banker and civic activist. She has formed a technocratic transitional government which has been tasked to prepare the ground for future elections. This effort will depend heavily on prolonged outside support.

While a superficial degree of calm has returned to the capital, Bangui, violence continues in many other parts of the country, with reports that Christians and Muslims are being forced to leave their homes as areas are 'cleansed' by rival fighting forces. UN Secretary-General Ban

ki-Moon has stated that “[de facto partition of the CAR is a distinct risk](#).” Christian extremists go so far as to assert that there is no future place for Muslims in CAR. Some Muslims are now talking about northern secession and there have been unconfirmed reports that al-Shabaab ‘trainers’ from Somalia are now offering their services.

CAR achieved independence from France in 1960. Although it possesses extensive agricultural and mineral resources, it is one of the poorest countries in the world. Since independence, the country has experienced almost permanent political instability and regular rebellions. Rebellions in neighbouring countries have often destabilised CAR. French influence has remained strong since independence and has on several occasions extended to military action on the ground. French commandos based in the country supported the coup which overthrew the notoriously brutal regime of self-styled emperor Jean-Bedel Bokassa, in 1979. Although multi-party politics has been the rule rather than the exception since the early 1980s, there has been little or no consolidation of democracy.

Further reading

“Fears for the new regime”, *Africa Confidential*, 7 February 2014 [available from the Library]

“[Stuck on the Edge of the Periphery in the CAR](#)”, Ben Shepherd [expert comment], Chatham House, 12 February 2014

“[Central African Republic: Ethnic cleansing and sectarian killings](#)”, Amnesty International, 12 February 2014

[Written Statement](#) by FCO Minister Mark Simmonds (HC Deb 13 February 2014 c51-2WS)

“[Genesis of the crisis in the Central African Republic](#)”, Babette Zoumara and Abdul Rauf-Ibrahim, *Pambazuka Newsletter*, 30 January 2014

“[Genocide-mongering does nothing to help us understand the messy dynamics of conflict in the CAR](#)”, Louisa Lombard, *African Arguments*, 24 January 2014

“[Central African Republic: Background Brief and Analysis of the Crisis](#)”, UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Research Analyst paper, 15 January 2014

“[Conflict in the Central African Republic: Religion, Power and Prospects for Reconciliation](#)”, Chatham House meeting summary, January 2014

“[CAR: A failed state implodes](#)”, IRIN News multimedia special, 6 December 2013

“[Central African Republic: better late than never](#)”, International Crisis Group briefing, 2 December 2013

The International Development Committee has taken evidence on the crisis in the CAR:

See: [Written evidence submitted by the Department for International Development](#), 8 January 2014 

[Crisis in the Central African Republic - oral and written evidence - 3 December 2013](#), HC888, 30 January 2014

[ReliefWeb page](#) on the humanitarian situation in the Central African Republic

“[Crisis Watch: CAR](#)”, International Crisis Group [monthly summary of events]