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“Crisis in the Central African Republic”

*Excerpts of Remarks by Chairman Chris Smith
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and Int'l Orgs.
2172 Rayburn HOB
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Good morning. Today's hearing is not being called an “emergency” hearing, but it very well could be. Because since we first decided to hold a hearing to spotlight the human rights situation in the Central African Republic, the situation has deteriorated even further so that today the country is on the verge of a humanitarian catastrophe.

Coups and dictatorships have characterized the Central African Republic since its independence in 1960, but the current crisis is far more dangerous than what has come before.

Consider this: in a country of approximately 5 million people, roughly 1.1 million citizens face serious food insecurity. Some 460,000 CAR nationals are displaced, including 64,000 who have fled to neighboring countries as refugees and nearly 400,000 who are internally displaced.

This is because there has been a complete breakdown of law and order in the country following the ouster of former President François Bozizé in March of this year. After riding to power on the back of an insurrection known as Seleka, the current dictator, Michel Djotodia, has found it difficult to disengage.

Seleka, originally a political alliance, has transformed into a militia of about 25,000 men, up to 90% of which come from Chad and Sudan and therefore constitute in the eyes of many a foreign invasion force. They do not speak the local language, and are Muslim in a nation that is roughly 80% Christian. They have targeted churches for destruction and stirred up sectarian hatreds where none had existed previously. Indeed, the Sudanese contingent in particular are said to be members of the notorious *janjaweed*, who have spread slavery and destruction in the Darfur region of Sudan and now are doing the same in the Central African Republic.

And if that is not bad enough, elsewhere, the Lord's Resistance Army, or LRA, under the psychotic leader Joseph Kony is also loose in the Central African Republic. Both the LRA and Seleka are said to kidnap children to serve as soldiers, and UNICEF estimates that there are now as many as 3,500 child soldiers affiliated with armed groups in the country.

Djotodia has formally disbanded Seleka, but Seleka continues to wreak destruction in the countryside, and they have seized mines and other resources in the country. Djotodia's writ does not extend much beyond the capital city of Bangui.

Even in Bangui, the situation is chaotic. One of our witnesses, Mike Jobbins, has related how "There have been nearly a dozen successful or attempted carjackings of humanitarian vehicles over the past two weeks and at least three aid workers have lost their lives since the crisis began."

In response to the depredations of Seleka, their victims have begun to form self-defense units referred to as anti-balaka, or anti-machete, gangs, which have begun to commit retaliatory outrages of their own. Rather than confront the Seleka rebels who are responsible for starting the cycle of violence, however, they often target Muslim civilians, who are deemed "soft targets." Thus, violence begets violence.

The situation is so bad that just this past week, John Ging, director of the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs warned, "We are very, very concerned that the seeds of a genocide are being sown."

All this is happening in a state which is, by any definition, dysfunctional.

In the words of PM Nicolas Tiangaye, who is the closest thing to a legitimate figure in the government of the Central African Republic and whom my staff and I met with this summer when he visited Washington, the Central African Republic is "anarchy, a non-state."

This descent into chaos has compounded the misery of the people of the Central African Republic suffered greatly and lagged substantially in terms of development. Prior to this year, the Central African Republic ranked 180 of 186 countries per the UN Human Development Index.

One area where the Central African Republic did lead bespeaks an irony: National Geographic ranked the Central African Republic as the nation least affected by light pollution. This is, of course, indicative of its low level of development, and the neglect and affirmative harm which generations of political leaders have subjected the country and its people.

Amid this darkness, however, there are bright spots. It is the leadership of churches and faith based organizations, as well as traditional Muslim leaders long resident in the Central African Republic who have sought to defuse communal tensions. These indigenous Muslim leaders who speak for peace need to be recognized and distinguished from foreign fighters from countries such as Sudan – the same *janjaweed* who harrowed Darfur – who kill and sow destruction in the name of jihad.

We will have the opportunity to hear from one such courageous faith leader, Bishop Nongo. I had the privilege of hosting Bishop Nongo in my office when he came to visit Washington this summer, and I was moved nearly to tears as he described the suffering of the people in his country. It is leaders such as Bishop Nongo, who provide assistance to all regardless of their affiliation, and who strive for peace, who provide the greatest hope for the Central African Republic.