

Written Testimony

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Members of Congress, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Chairman Smith, Representative Bass, and Members of the Committee, I would like to begin by thanking you for convening this timely and important meeting, and for the chance to update you on the increasingly worrying crisis in the Central African Republic.

I would also like to recognize the extraordinary work that my co-panelists, the distinguished Reverend Nongo-Aziagbia and Mr. Bolopion, and their organizations are doing to raise awareness of the severity of the crisis, and respond to the urgent needs within the CAR.

My name is Mike Jobbins, I work on violence prevention with Search for Common Ground. My testimony is informed by our on-the-ground programs in the Central African Republic, but the views expressed are my own.

I will begin by speaking briefly on the current state of the crisis in the CAR, some of the risks of a further deterioration of conditions there, and then conclude by considering some practical steps to help improve the situation.

THE CURRENT STATE OF CRISIS IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

The politico-military crisis, which the Central African Republic has experienced since late 2012, has taken a new turn. Fighting between the former regime and the *Seleka* rebellion profoundly weakened an already-fragile state.

Prior to the crisis, the Central African Republic ranked 180th out of 187 countries in the world on the UN's Human Development index. The central government had little control outside of Bangui, and was led by an increasingly-narrow group of political elites, including the wife and children of then-President Francois Bozizé, who had himself come to power in a coup in 2003.

A series of long-running rebel movements operated in the north of the country prior to the recent coup, and with porous borders, the Central African Republic became home to foreign armed groups, including the Chadian rebel leader Baba Ladé, the Lord's Resistance Army, and heavily armed Sudanese poachers.

Seleka's arrival in Bangui in March 2013 ushered in a new era of insecurity and chaos. UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon observed in May that “the country is plunging into a state of general anarchy marked by a complete breakdown of law and order,” an observation that has sadly continued to play out over the past eight months. The instability displaced more than 400,000 people, claimed countless lives, and risks to deteriorate further. In the present context, we can see three forms of violence against civilians.

THREE PATTERNS OF VIOLENCE

1. Abuses by semi-organized armed groups, notably the (ex) *Seleka* forces. The *Seleka* movement, officially disbanded since September, still retains *de facto* control in much of the country. Abuses committed by *Seleka* fighters have been well documented by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and national human rights groups, and include arbitrary killings, looting, pillaging, and rape on a large scale.

There had always been little internal cohesion within the *Seleka* movement. *Seleka* came into being as a coalition of fighters from long-running and historically-opposed rebel groups and remained fractious, with troops loyal to individual commanders with only a loose hierarchy. There is no coherent agenda, ideology, or political platform behind the *Seleka* movement, aside from – at most – a general sense that the north of the country has been historically neglected. Apart from being predominantly Muslim, and being driven by opportunism, there is little else that fighters within the *Seleka* movement have in common with one another.

Over the course of the rebellion, the numbers of *Seleka* fighters dramatically increased as its success attracted recruits. It is widely cited that the movement began with 5 000 fighters at the end of 2012 and are now thought to number more than 20 000. While it is impossible to know the exact proportions, local media, civil society, and human rights groups have observed that a large proportion of *Seleka* commanders and fighters come from Chad and Sudan. There are also credible reports of the recruitment of children into the movement, and UNICEF currently estimates that there are now as many as 3 500 child soldiers affiliated with armed groups in the CAR.

The rapid increase in poorly-disciplined fighters, the lack of coherent objectives or community support, and the absence of a clear command-and-control structure, particularly since being officially disbanded, has meant that the majority of *ex-Seleka* fighters have drifted into looting, pillaging, and attempting to continue to reap the spoils of war. This is dangerous for two reasons.

First, the lack of internal control makes it difficult for political leadership to reign in the remnants of the movement. In recent days there have been reports of violence between different groups of *Seleka* fighters, creating the risk of new waves of violence.

Second, the lack of support structures has led some groups of *ex-Seleka* to try to rally local Muslim civilians to their “cause,” and to try to position themselves as protectors of the interests of the Muslim community in places like Yaloké and Bangassou where *ex-Seleka* sought to make common cause with local Muslims when they felt under threat, or in apparent alliances with Peulh herdsmen that cross the region. It is possible that as *Seleka* forces divide and come under threat, this trend of increasingly seeking alliances based on identity-lines at the local level may

increase. There are persistent rumors – though no confirmation – of attempts by *Seleka* groups to form alliances with groups from North Africa and the Middle East.

2. Banditry, criminality, score settling, and other opportunistic activity. Alongside the banditry and abuses committed by *ex-Seleka* elements, the breakdown of law and order created an opportunity for other forms of violence. This includes carjackings, highway robberies, and other kinds of criminality, which has further exacerbated insecurity for ordinary citizens. The turmoil that has persisted in the CAR since last December has created a vacuum, in which other criminal groups have operated. This includes the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), which has operated in the southeastern CAR for years. The Ugandan Army's operations against the LRA were impeded during the crisis, although they have since resumed. In addition to the LRA, in recent days we have seen several movements of heavily armed wildlife poachers moving southwards from Sudan.

3. Inter-communal violence. As a result of the lawlessness and fears of inter-communal strife, many cities, including Bangui, have become increasingly segregated along ethnic and religious lines as people settle in neighborhoods shared with their family members and identity group in order to better ensure their security. Self-defense militias, known as *anti-Balaka*, have emerged in many parts of the country and clashed with *ex-Seleka* elements.

These groups have actively attacked *ex-Seleka* fighters, and in many cases have also explicitly targeted Muslim communities perceived be allies of *ex-Seleka* forces. The targeting of innocent civilians and the practice of “collective punishment” has created the dynamic of attacks and reprisals between communities. The documentation of atrocities committed against civilians, which began primarily in the northwest has increased tensions throughout the country.

The presence of local defense groups to protect a neighborhood or village has existed to various degrees in the past, but we have seen a dramatic proliferation of such groups the country in recent months. Attacks by *anti-Balaka* groups have often triggered “collective punishment” reprisals by *ex-Seleka* forces, particularly targeting young men based on their perceived ethnicity or neighborhood. *Anti-Balaka* groups at the moment do not appear to be organized beyond their immediate surroundings, although a few have proclaimed loyalty and to, and identified with, the former regime.

In addition, while many such groups have been armed with traditional weapons, including hunting rifles and machetes, there have been a few cases of more heavy weapons being used, including a clash at Gbombolo in mid-October that saw artillery use and which left six dead. Later that month, a weapons cache believed to belong to *anti-Balaka* groups was discovered in Bangui including mortar shells, ground-to-ground missiles and Kalashnikov ammunition.

As word of violence spreads throughout the country, it has the result of further increasing tensions, fears, and rumors, creating the risk of a self-perpetuating cycle. For example, in the far southeast prefecture of Haut Mbomou, which has seen relatively little presence of *Seleka* forces, information about attacks elsewhere in the country have led both Muslim and Christian communities to segregate, arm themselves, and view each other with suspicion. As a result, long-running conflicts between predominantly Muslim herders and predominantly Christian farmers

have boiled over into serious violence in several places. In the climate of fear, mistrust, and armament, any small incident risks quickly escalating.

This amalgamation of factors places civilians at imminent risk of atrocity crimes. On Friday November 1, United Nations Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, Mr. Adama Dieng, asserted that violence in the country may already constitute crimes against humanity and war crimes, civilians face imminent threat of atrocities, and he would not rule out the possibility of genocide. On November 13th, 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.”

HUMANITARIAN CONSEQUENCES

The humanitarian consequences have been devastating. The United Nations estimates that half of 4.6 million Central Africans are in need of urgent assistance. Nearly 400,000 people have fled their homes, many living in the bush and forests out of fear of being attacked in their villages. The current period, from September to November is harvesting season in much of the country, but people are unable to harvest out of fear of attack. As a result, about 1.1 million people are facing food shortages. The school year should have started last month, but seven out of ten children were unable to return. There are critical shortages in nearly every sector: food, health, shelter, water and sanitation, and education.

Insecurity in Bangui has led to increased pressure on aid workers. 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. The situation is troubling, and appears to be degrading. Yet, there is substantial humanitarian capacity in the CAR to respond to the crisis. There are about 28 international NGOs operating in the country, including Catholic Relief Services, Mercy Corps, IMC, MSF, IRC and others, as well as UN Agencies like UNICEF and WFP, and the ICRC. While these groups are largely able to secure operational access to provide assistance, there are chronic funding shortfalls and only 42% of the UN’s Consolidated Appeal has been met.

THE RISK OF FURTHER DETERIORATION

The humanitarian crisis in the Central African Republic, and its human cost, is troubling. Even more troubling is recognition that we are seeing the ingredients necessary for an even greater tragedy. We see many of the same features emerging in this situation that we have seen in the DRC, Syria, Nigeria and other regions that have seen protracted violence on a large scale. These include:

1. The emergence of a multiplicity of militias closely aligned with ethnic and religious identity groups. As both *Anti-Balaka* and *ex-Seleka* groups seek to rally support, there is a risk of further polarization along ethnic and religious lines;
2. The proliferation of weapons in the country, including from looted government arsenals, but likely also through the international weapons trade. This is accompanied by illicit trafficking in diamonds, cattle, poaching and other transnational criminal activities that have long-existed in the CAR;
3. Increasing popular perception of a sectarian divide, driven by recent experiences of violence;

4. The breakdown of economic and social life, which has exacerbated suffering for ordinary citizens, and driven a sense of frustration and desperation in both rural and urban areas;
5. An unclear political transition process, and an uncertain “endgame” for the transitional leadership and ex-Seleka fighters, should the transition succeed.

RESPONDING TO THE CURRENT CRISIS

There is a manifest need – and a critical opportunity – for the international community, national and international civil society, and local actors to take urgent action to prevent violence, provide lifesaving assistance, and support a path towards a stable transition to civilian rule. While the current situation is troubling, it is not hopeless.

There are promising local initiatives to resolve tensions within the CAR, including a series of interfaith meetings and several examples of ex-*Seleka* commanders being transferred or moved as a result of abuses. Humanitarian organizations on the ground have the capacity to respond, and discussions on a MISCA peacekeeping force appear to be slowly advancing.

There is a realistic chance for a coordinated, strategic, and urgent response by the international community – including the United States – to begin stabilizing the country before the situation deteriorates further. The current moment in CAR represents a key opportunity to head off the worst case scenario, along the principle that “a stitch in time saves nine.” To identify what this might look like, we, Search for Common Ground, convened a group of civil society and religious leaders in Bangui in October, and consulted an array of international and local actors on how best to respond to the crisis. We identify four immediate needs:

1. Improving Security. The multiplicity of militia groups, particularly *Seleka* elements have overwhelmed the capacity of FOMAC peacekeepers and the remains of the former armed forces and the Gendarmerie. There is therefore an urgent need for the deployment of the much-anticipated MISCA peacekeeping mission which is sufficiently resourced, with the adequate numbers of troops and mobility, and with a suitable mandate to protect civilians. U.S. logistical, financial and planning support to this mission will be critical to ensure its success. At the same time, there is urgent need for a limited interim force aimed at securing the rapidly-closing humanitarian space and securing the major arteries in Bangui, in order to facilitate the circulation of goods, people, and humanitarian materiel.

Additionally, there is a need for continued strong international engagement to protect civilians, documenting, denouncing and dissuading abuses committed by the different armed groups. This is a role that can be played by a reinforced BINUCA office if rapidly deployed and resourced, under the existing Security Council Resolution. The US can support these efforts through high-visibility public statements recognizing the gravity of the situation, through its interactions with the Transitional Government, and through its engagement with regional and international partners.

2. Community-Based Violence Prevention. While the rapid deployment of peacekeeping forces are a priority, the current situation risks seriously deteriorating before MISCA's deployment. Even if the challenges posed by armed groups are addressed, the proliferation of weapons and mistrust within communities will create long-running issues if they are not dealt

with. There is a need and opportunity for the US to support existing initiatives by civil society, media, the religious community and other local actors to stem the tide of fear and polarization.

We have seen media, civil society and religious leaders successfully mobilize their communities to de-escalate tensions and reject violence in many areas during the height of the 2009-2010 war in Cote d'Ivoire and even in some parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The rise of fear and mistrust is not irreversible; the capacity and the potential to change course is present in the Central African Republic as well.

3. Humanitarian response. There is tremendous humanitarian need. Reliable information is difficult, but it is believed that more than half of the entire population requires urgent assistance and nearly every kind of emergency assistance, including health, protection, and food security is necessary. As I noted before, the human and operational capacity exists in country to begin meeting these needs, but there are significant funding shortfalls in order to respond.

4. Transition Planning. Finally, key questions contentious questions remain unresolved, including elections and the political future of the transitional leadership, the potential demobilization of *Seleka* combatants, reconciliation, economic recovery, restoration of the state, and potential transitional justice mechanisms. While these are significant issues requiring long-term sustained effort, they are also intrinsically linked to the interests of actors perpetrating the current wave of violence.

Many of these issues were agreed in the Libreville and Ndjamenas political roadmap, but will require significant political accompaniment to put into practice. The U.S. could support this by re-establishing a diplomatic presence in Bangui as soon as feasible or through the option of temporary accreditation in a neighboring country, and increasing contacts with the transitional authorities at all levels, as well as with civil society and other groups.

This is a critical moment for the U.S. government to engage proactively and decisively to protect civilians and prevent current threats from evolving into large-scale atrocities in the Central African Republic. While there are indeed a multitude and complexity of challenges facing the U.S. today, failing to act in CAR today will make it harder and more costly in both lives and dollars for the United States to act tomorrow.