

**Testimony of
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**Submitted to
The U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs,
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights and International
Organizations**

**HEARING ON THE CRISIS IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC (CAR)
May 1, 2014**

In March 2013, the Seleka rebel group, made up of mostly Muslims from Chad and Sudan, overthrew the government of President Bozizé, and as part of its short brutish rule over CAR attacked mainly Christian homes and churches and other non-Muslim communities. As the country descended into chaos, traditional self-help groups, known as Anti-Balaka, sought revenge against the Seleka and began indiscriminately killing members of the Muslim community, burning mosques and homes, causing thousands of Muslims to flee. Currently there are almost 900,000 displaced both inside and outside the country, and 2,000 reported dead.

What began as a war for power and resources with an ancillary religious dimension can now appear as a religious conflict. However, as the leaders of the Inter-Religious Platform¹ explain, this is not a religious war: “never has an Imam, a Bishop or a Pastor led the fighting or justified the killing.”² Yet, the social fabric has been torn and the violence has affected both non-Muslim and Muslim communities. Muslim communities (15% of the population) are particularly at risk; they have been systematically under siege, with people being attacked and murdered, their homes and mosques looted and destroyed. Some of the last remaining Muslims in Bangui have just left the country, with the UN considering the forced departure of the tens of thousands of Muslims who have left as “ethnic cleansing.” Non-Muslim communities also continue to be attacked by Seleka forces, particularly in the areas of the north.

African Union, French, and European Union peacekeepers are currently on the ground, yet are largely unable to contain the violence, provide adequate humanitarian access, and protect vulnerable populations. A recently passed UNSC resolution authorizes a UN Peacekeeping operation with almost 12,000 soldiers and police by September. The people of CAR, though, cannot wait till then.

Half of the country (2.7 million people) require some sort of assistance, with 1.9 million particularly at risk. In addition to immediate needs for food, shelter, protection and health care,

¹ The Inter-Religious Platform includes the Catholic Archbishop of Bangui, Dieudonne Nzapalainga, the leader of the Evangelical Alliance, Pastor Nicolas Geurekoyame, and the President of the CAR Islamic Community, Imam Oumar Kobine Layama. The three religious leaders are working together in CAR to promote peace among their religious groups, in efforts to quell the growing inter-religious violence.

² Central African Republic: Christians and Muslims Counter Ethnic Cleansing. Time Magazine. 7 April 2014.

local markets have been decimated because many of the traders and cattle herders were Muslim; local markets have run out of daily staples like sugar, flour and meat. Transport of goods into the country is a challenge and the cost of common household items, like soap, have increased 300 percent.

In my April visit to CAR, I saw the great destruction that violence had brought to the houses people lived in and the fear in people's lives, yet also saw hope that people wanted to rebuild and reconnect. In Bossangoa, where most houses had lost either their roofs or doors, people used tarps we distributed to return to their homes, while working to re-thatch their homes more permanently. I spoke with farmers eager to return to their fields to plant for the rainy season, using the seeds and tools we had distributed. They were relying on their own community structures to watch for and warn of signs of violence and danger. Continued threats of violence are on everyone's mind and we are particularly concerned about the space and ability for Muslims to return to the country.

CRS is addressing the tears in the social fabric through a project called *Mango Teré*, meaning "Come to a Consensus," which works towards reconciliation. This project expands our *Secure, Empowered and Connected Communities*, which was primarily helping communities protect themselves against LRA violence, to vulnerable areas in CAR most affected by the violence. The project works through and strengthens already existing diocesan Justice and Peace Commission (JPC) to repair the social fabric of communities through trainings led by peacebuilding experts. The project also works to strengthen community resilience against internal and external threats, assisting communities to prepare themselves for impending violence through community organization, communication and peaceful self-defense. Ultimately the goal is to enable cohesive, self-directed, and connected communities to avoid or reduce their exposure to threats associated with the presence of armed groups and ongoing conflict in areas most vulnerable to attack and ongoing interreligious/inter-communal tensions in the CAR.

Through *Mango Teré*, CRS has already seen notable glimmers of hope. As noted above, Muslims have been fleeing the country in droves. As the last Muslims were planning to leave Bangui, though, *Mango Teré* organized an event that helped the CAR government make progress in negotiations with the community. After this event, Muslims that had planned to leave decided instead to unload their trucks and stay to participate in a process of reconciliation. We see this project as an essential part of rebuilding the country, so that people can live in peace and community as they once did.

Cardinal McCarrick, a board member of CRS, a member of the USCCB Committee on International Justice and Peace, and Chair of the USCCB Ad Hoc Subcommittee for the Church in Africa, recently visited Bangui with a delegation of U.S. religious leaders, including the Imam Mohamed Magid of the Islamic Society of North America and Pastor Leith Anderson, President of the National Association of Evangelicals, in a show of solidarity with the CAR religious leaders and the communities torn apart by violence. There, they visited with communities, and as observers, signed a "Declaration for Peace" that outlines a desire for an end to violence and encourages "inter-religious dialogue."

The USCCB has worked with and supported the CAR Catholic Church to elevate the situation in the US. In July 2013, Bishop Richard E. Pates, Chair of the Committee on International Justice and Peace of the USCCB met with Bishop Nestor Desire Nongo, the Vice President of the Central African Catholic Bishops' Conference to discuss the situation in CAR and the work of the Church in the country. In a subsequent letter to the Church in CAR Bishop Pates said, "We will certainly present and advocate for your requests for increased security forces from the United Nations and the rebuilding of CAR government capacity. We will continue to urge the U.S. Government to actively support the work of the Religious Leaders Platform to rebuild social cohesion. Lastly, we will ask USAID to increase its funding for immediate emergency food and non-food items (NFI) supplies and to help civilians rebuild their institutions and their farms."

Working with Catholic Relief Services (CRS), the USCCB organized two visits by Bishop Nestor Desire Nongo Aziagbia from the Diocese of Bossangoa and Vice President of the Central African Catholic Bishops' Conference. During the first visit in September 2013, Bishop Nongo held meetings with State Department and Congressional leaders, and returned in November to testify before the House Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations. In March 2014 the USCCB, CRS and other NGOs sponsored a Washington visit of the Inter-Religious Leaders' Platform, consisting of the Catholic Archbishop of Bangui, Dieudonne Nzapalainga, the leader of the Evangelical Alliance, Pastor Nicolas Geurekoyame, and the President of the CAR Islamic Community, Imam Oumar Kobine Layama. The delegation held meetings with State Department, the National Security Council, the White House's Office on Faith-based and Partnership Initiatives and Congress. In July this year Bishop Pates, Chair of the U.S. bishops' Committee on International Justice and Peace, will travel to Bangui for a solidarity visit.

CRS, founded by the U.S. bishops in 1943 as the official relief and development agency of the Catholic community in our nation, has been working in Central African Republic since 2007. CRS works closely with its partners—the Catholic Church and local Caritas to assist those in need.

Understanding the state of the country, and recognizing that the people of CAR do not just need immediate assistance, but will need long-term support, CRS has committed private funding and assistance to CAR over the next five years. With this and public donor support, we will focus on three areas: 1) Immediate Relief through the provision of shelter, camp management, food and other household items; 2) Recovery activities through the provision of transitional shelter, access to livelihoods inputs (seeds and tools), cash for work, non-agricultural livelihoods and market based support, promotion of savings and lending; and 3) Community Protection/Social Cohesion, including community risk mapping and planning, establishing early warning and referral systems, training of community leaders in peace building/conflict resolution, formation and training of community cohesion committees and support for trauma healing.

With this in mind, CRS and the USCCB make the following recommendations to the U.S. Government:

- 1. Adequately fund and support UN peacekeeping efforts to ensure that relief and recovery activities are tenable. The USG must ensure that the peacekeeping force:**

- Prioritizes the protection of civilians, especially women and children, led by communities as they return to their homes, and works to ensure that Muslim refugee communities are safe to return from neighboring countries.
- Has strong communications and command and control structures that clearly lay out how the PKO will engage existing troops (AU, French and EU) on the ground.
- Has sufficient high-quality, well-trained troops from neutral countries who do not act with ulterior motives.
- Works to ensure the country remains one, and that surrounding countries do not undermine the unity of the country.

2. Provide ongoing leadership and robust funding for humanitarian efforts in CAR. The USG should also help galvanize other donors to fulfill their pledges for humanitarian assistance in CAR. All efforts must:

- Support the displaced and those who are hosting them so their immediate needs are met, as well as their return when conditions allow so that they can rebuild their livelihoods, plant their farms, and support their families.
- Support the voluntary return of refugees so the country can restore its rich cultural diversity. This will depend on the security of the country, but should allow for safe passage and secure existence for Muslim populations who desire to return.
- Develop a regional plan for refugees who have fled to neighboring countries that are already heavily burdened with their own populations' needs.
- Integrate peacebuilding and conflict resolution activities to rebuild social cohesion torn apart by the recent fighting and to prevent future outbreaks of violence.
- Ensure conflict sensitive approaches to humanitarian assistance. This requires a full understanding of the conflict and risks involved with providing certain types of assistance so that it does not de facto support one group over another. The USG should also consider support for increasing the capacity of the humanitarian community to ensure assistance does no harm.

3. Affirm a commitment to CAR over the long term. We commend the appointment of a Special Representative for CAR, and the U.S. Government's plans to re-open the Embassy. We further call upon the USG to develop plans to address longer term needs (3-5 years) that:

- Addresses the needs of the CAR government to build capacity to provide government services and exercise functional control over the country. One urgent priority is the rebuilding of the local police and security structures which need training and accompaniment. Without security and stabilization, the culture of impunity will continue, and the cycle of violence will no doubt continue.
- Prioritizes full USG presence in country so that it can play a leadership role and work with other governments to ensure a robust response and recovery, as well as longer term development plans.
- Prioritizes reintegration of ex-militia into economic and livelihood activities with a focus on youth. Young men need to be enrolled in reintegration programs that are practical and lead to productive job activities;
- Prioritizes longer-term economic needs such as reconstruction of people's productive assets, keeping conflict sensitivity in mind;

- Recognizes that elections should not be rushed, but the process fully incorporates all CAR citizens, especially those Muslims who have fled and wish to return. Any election held should be well-organized, free and fair to end the cycle of illegitimate leaders who have neglected the needs of the Central African people.