

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC: MONTHS OF PERPETUAL VIOLENCE RAISE DOUBTS OVER NEXT YEAR ELECTIONS

By Sami Evrard

A year ago the transitional government was appointed in the Central Africa Republic with the main mission of restoring security and organizing proper elections in February 2015, at the latest. Early September, the National Election Authority declared that the conditions for legitimate presidential election were not fulfilled and that elections in February would be “unthinkable”. Though insufficient funding was put forward as a reason for postponement of the election, the decision was certainly influenced by the security environment.

On December 9 2014, Hervé Ladsous, Head of the UN department of Peacekeeping Operation, declared that the next election in Central African Republic (CAR) should be held before August 2015 or the whole transition process that has been put in place since January 2014 will be compromised. However, Ladsous also recognize that after a year of transition, the security situation remains poor and the central state is “at best weak and quiet often absent”.

Coming from an UN diplomat, this arch statement towards a transitional body put in place under the supervision of the international community gives an idea of the bad economic and security perspectives that CAR faces.

To recall, in 2012, rebel groups, mostly composed of Muslim troops and lead by Michel Djotodia joined their forces under the name of Seleka to oust the president Francois Bozize. In March 2013, the Seleka coalition overthrew Bozize and Djotodia became the new president. Few months later, in September, Djotodia formally dissolved the Seleka.

However, unable to control its troops and suffering from rivalries with other Seleka leaders, Djotodia was unable to stop his former rebel army from attacks against civilian population throughout the country, contributing to the strengthening and development of Christian anti-balakas coalition. The two sides fought each other for months, committing massacres, which prompted the international community to step in and to force Djotodia to abandon the presidency.

In January 2014, the Transitional Government (TG) led by Catherine Samba-Panza, was elected by the National Unity Parliament (CNT). The main objective of this

transitional body was to restore the security, to initiate the country reconstruction and establish the proper condition for the next 2015 election.

In July 2014, a conference organized in Brazzaville ended with the signature, by the TG and the most important rebel groups, of a peace agreement which had for ambition to put an end to the current hostilities. But even before the signature, many observers doubted the capacity of the sides to apply the agreement which provided no concrete mechanisms of pacification such as disarmament measures, troop demobilization, end of weapons circulation, etc.

As a result, according to a report published by AP, more than 5000 people have died between December 2013 and September 2014 in clashes between Muslims and Christians. And the UN agency for refugee expects that the number of displaced will exceed 850,000 in January 2015, almost a fifth of the total population.

The lack of tangible security improvements in the country were also due to the internal split within Seleka. Indeed former Seleka coalition, which bears responsibility for a great number of violent incidents in CAR and which has always been composed of uncontrollable elements, recently split into 3 factions.

The “Union pour la Paix en Centrafrique” (UPC) politically led by Abil Awal and military led by Ali Darass was founded in Bambari, on October 25. The “Front Populaire pour la Renaissance de Centrafrique” (FPRC) was founded by Nouredine Adam in Kaga Bandoro, on November 2. And on November 19, in Bria, Zacharia Damane supervised the creation of the “Rassemblement Patriotique pour le Renouveau de la Centrafrique” (RPRC) which appointed Zoundeko as the leader of the military chain of command.

Already prone to exactions against the civilian population and to violent engagements with governmental or international troops when their leadership over their zone of control seemed threatened, this internal division increases even more insecurity.

As an example, on December 2, elements of the CAR army, sent to Bambari to organize in the city the visit of Alexandre-Ferdinand N'Guendet, the National Transitional Council president, were attacked by armed gunmen. At least one soldier and one rebel were killed and one soldier was heavily wounded. While elements led by Ali Darass were firstly reported as the perpetrator of the attack, the UPC issued a communiqué stating that the incident was orchestrated by Zoundeko as a manipulation to vilify Darass's faction.

The anti-Balaka also recently split creating two factions. Sebastien Wenezoui created the “Mouvance Patriotique pour l'Avenir-ikwè” (MPA-Ik) on September 25 and, in reaction, Patrice Edouard Ngaïssona announced the creation of the “Parti Centrafricain pour l'Unité et le Développement” (PCUD).

Representatives of both movements announced that they would abandon their weapons for politics and work for peace and reconstruction. But it has to be noted that the anti-Balaka movement has never been as structured as the Seleka. It is mostly composed of villagers, former soldiers, idle youth, etc for whom political fight

doesn't offer revenue perspectives such as looting, racketing, roadblocking or kidnapping.

So far reintegration of former rebels into the civil society became one of the key conditions for the improvement of security situation in CAR. For example, on November 11, elements of the former Seleka coalition stationed in the Beal military camp, Bangui, threatened to explode an ammunition stock if their demand regarding their disarmament and transfer were not met by the transitional government within 3 days. The group demanded either its integration in the national army or payment of 50000 CFA (95 USD) by fighter instead of the 10 000 CFA (19 USD) offered by the authorities. According to some sources, more than 4 tonnes of explosives were stored in the camp.

Meanwhile Seleka and anti-Balakas are not the only groups representing a threat to security in CAR. "Front Democratique du Peuple Centrafricain" (FDPC) formerly allied with the Seleka, took refuge in western CAR jungle after Djotodia came to power and dissension appeared between him and FDPC's leader, Abdoulaye Miskine. Miskine was finally arrested by Cameroonian authorities and imprisoned in Yaounde in September 2013. Since then, his troops launched a series of attacks kidnapping CAR and Cameroonian civilians as well as a Polish priest in order to accelerate his liberation. Freed on November 25, Miskine declared that he and his movement "have decided to abandon the armed struggle, drop their weapons and continue the fight on the political level".

Like the Seleka and anti-Balaka, the FDPC was among the signatories of Brazzaville peace accord through which they already promised to end hostilities towards civilians or other rebel groups. Meanwhile continuation of violent action perpetrated by each side clearly indicates that peace declarations of rebel leaders in Central Africa must be taken with a pinch of salt.

CAR instability also offers a favourable ground for foreign rebel groups to prey on vulnerable communities. Like the Ugandan's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) who can easily cross the porous CAR border to conduct looting raids and kidnapping operations to reinforce its ranks. According to a recent report of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), LRA conducted 49 attacks in south-eastern CAR which resulted in at least 4 deaths and 201 since January 2014. Those numbers indicates an increase pattern of attack since 2012 resulting in more 26520 people displaced in the LRA-affected area.

The beginning off December was also marked by the re-appearance near Kabo of Baba Ladde, the leader of the Chadian Front Populaire pour le Redressement (FPR). In 2012, the Chadian army intervened to oust Ladde out of CAR and that time, it's troops of the UN stabilization mission in Central Africa (MINUSCA), and not CAR army, who arrested Ladde and his 40 armed men escort.

Somali terrorist group Al-Shabaab, that till the present moment has not marked its presence on the territory of CAR, also called on Muslims to wage jihad in Central Africa to revenge for sectarian attacks, perpetrated by members of Christian community. In a special issue of their propaganda magazine "Gaidi Mtaani", Al-Shabaab made parallels between situation of Muslims in Bangui and the events in Srebrenica in 1995. And, pointing at France as the leader of the international

coalition forces in Africa which is “disarming Muslim to facilitate the work of Christian militias”, the text called to all Muslims in general and to those adjacent to CAR to help their brothers.

In a country roughly composed of 40% Christians, 15% Muslims and the rest of population being animists, sectarian violence remain one of the main security threat in global perspective.

Inter-community clashes are reported across the country almost on a daily basis and in such context even a minor incident or rumour can spark a large-scale outbreak of sectarian violence, especially in urban areas where different communities live next to each other.

For example, on October 7, a Muslim man threw a grenade from a vehicle into the crowd in the district of Gobongo, northern Bangui causing at least 20 wounded. The attacker was afterward caught by the people, lynched and burned alive. The incident triggered a wave of unrest that lasted several days. Inhabitants of the mostly Muslim KM-5 district (southwest of Bangui) blocked roads, attacked a taxi, killing the driver as well as the passengers of the vehicle. Barricades were set up, dozens of habitations were set ablaze, and lynching and looting were reported as tension remained high the following days, culminating in the death of a Pakistani UN peacekeeper on October 9. On October 11, even the international airport of Bangui was briefly shut down because of gunshots in its vicinity. Calm was finally restored on October 13, but gunshots could still be heard in Bangui, and there were almost no business activities in the city as a lot of shops and administrations were still closed and barricades remained in some districts such as Miskine, Combattants, Gobongo, Ouhango or Boy-Rabe.

In such context, it is unlikely that the transitional government - which has been accused, early October, of money embezzlement over a 10 millions dollars gift from Angola to cover humanitarian aid and which repeatedly failed to justify its opaque management - will be able to calm down tensions and provide legitimacy to elections in the coming year.

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