



EUFOR RCA: tough start, smooth end

by Thierry Tardy

On 15 March, the EU-led operation in the Central African Republic (CAR), EUFOR RCA, came to an end after slightly less than a year. The ninth EU military operation in the framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) was launched in April 2014 and deployed to the capital city, Bangui. Mandated to provide stability in parts of Bangui, as well as secure the city's airport for an initial period of six months, it was later renewed for a further three months before handing over to the UN operation (MINUSCA).

While the process of establishing the mission was painful and doubts were expressed over its added value, EUFOR RCA seems to have delivered on its mandate and contributed to stabilising the situation in Bangui. Sustaining these achievements – in part through the new EU advisory mission – is now one of the main challenges ahead.

Difficult delivery

The situation in the CAR began to deteriorate in 2012 when fighting broke out between the government and a coalition of armed groups known as Seleka. When President Bozizé was then overthrown in March 2013, local militias – anti-Balaka – emerged in opposition to the rebels. France deployed troops in the country in December 2013 (Operation Sangaris) in parallel to an African Union-led operation (MISCA). However, the political and humanitarian situation proved to be

worse than expected, and the assistance of the EU was soon solicited as well.

The subsequent creation and launch of EUFOR RCA took place under difficult circumstances. Deployed in support of the AU mission in a highly unstable environment, the mission was potentially one of the most dangerous EU operations ever launched. Its mandate was robust: the use of force was authorised to protect the civilian population in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2134 (28 January 2014).

And yet, the mission's strength was modest (roughly 750 troops), its mandate was limited in both space (two districts of Bangui and the airport) and time, and a clear exit strategy of eventually handing over to the AU was initially agreed (in practice it was handed over to the UN).

Nonetheless, very few member states saw the CAR as a priority for the EU. No less than six force generation conferences were needed to acquire the planned strength and, as a consequence, the formal launch of the operation was delayed on several occasions. In the end, France provided the majority of the missing troops, and the second largest troop contributor was a third country – Georgia – which delivered a company-sized unit (based at the airport). The limited area of deployment of the operation, in contrast to the magnitude of the country's needs, was indicative of its level of ambition.

The non-deployment of an EU Battle Group on this occasion was also deplored, as the situation seemed to ideally match the conditions for its use. The difficulty to launch EUFOR RCA was seen as further proof of the weak appetite for CSDP operations – despite the fresh consensus on the necessity to reinvigorate CSDP following the December 2013 European Council on defence. This was especially the case as the force generation process took place in parallel to the unfolding of the Ukrainian crisis, which impacted on the prioritisation of security threats.

Mission accomplished

When measured against its restricted mandate, EUFOR RCA has been a successful mission. First, it has contributed to the stabilisation of the situation in its area of deployment. Basic security conditions and freedom of movement have improved in districts 3 and 5 of Bangui as a result of the EU presence. The operation was tested on several occasions and was able to respond in line with its robust mandate. New crisis management procedures were also put into practice, including the ‘fast-track’ process (combining CONOPS and OPLAN). The Political Framework for Crisis Approach (PFCA), which brings together the EEAS, the Commission and member states for a shared analysis, was skipped in the planning of EUFOR RCA, but implemented for the EU follow-on mission. Furthermore, local surveys seem to indicate that the operation was by and large accepted by the population in Bangui.

Second, the ‘bridging’ model – whereby the EU acts first to buy time until a larger and longer-term operation can deploy – has again proven its worth. This had been implemented in the past in the Democratic Republic of Congo with operation Artemis in 2003, and in Chad with operation EUFOR Tchad in 2008-09. This time, the ‘bridge’ was to the AU-led MISCA and, eventually, the UN-led MINUSCA. The control of the M’Poko airport was handed over by the Georgians to MINUSCA in November 2014, and the premises of the EU Force HQ in Bangui are currently being transferred to the UN. The three-month extension of the mandate also allowed the UN to better prepare its deployment, and showed some flexibility on the EU side. The operation also permitted the French-led operation to re-deploy to other areas and, therefore, helped share the burden.

Third, the CAR has been the fourth country – after Bosnia and Herzegovina, Haiti and Afghanistan – to witness the deployment of the European Gendarmerie Force. This component of EUFOR RCA proved to be a valuable asset given that the force was operating in an exclusively urban environment. More than one

hundred police officers were deployed in support of the military units, carrying out public order and community policing, as well as criminal investigations.

Fourth, EUFOR RCA brought countries to the African continent (even if in small numbers) which had hitherto had no exposure to this environment. The fact that the operation ran smoothly may help reshape these countries’ perceptions about crisis management in Africa and the added-value of the EU in such ventures. At the same time, interestingly, some European countries are also returning to UN peacekeeping (in Mali, for example).

Despite the general success, however, the format and duration of EUFOR RCA inherently limit the lessons to be learnt. Apart from France, no other EU member state provided a company-level unit, and the short-term presence also displays a certain reluctance to commit long term to situations which carry security risks. This is not only telling of the EU’s security culture, but also raises questions over the sustainability of what the EU has achieved once it pulls out.

Furthermore, even if the general security situation has improved in the area of deployment, large-scale human rights violations have taken place in Bangui, violent groups have not been disarmed, and many trouble spots remain. In any case, it is the entire country, not just the capital, which is faced with huge security and humanitarian problems.

What next?

Two operations have taken over from EUFOR RCA as of mid-March 2015. One is the UN multidimensional operation, MINUSCA, which replaced the AU operation in September 2014 and will theoretically deploy its 11,820 uniformed personnel far beyond the limits of the capital city.

The second is the newly created EU Military Advisory Mission, EUMAM RCA, which will assist the CAR authorities in reforming parts of their security sector, in particular the management of the armed forces. Once force generation difficulties are overcome, the operation is set to last one year – although it is likely to stay longer given the scale of the country’s problems. Together with EU development programmes, these two missions will largely be responsible for ensuring the sustainability of what the Union has already achieved. Most crucially, however, the stability of the country will depend on the political process and the leaders which will emerge from the 2015 presidential elections.

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