



Central African Republic: Post-transitional realities

by José Luengo-Cabrera

The restoration of a democratically-elected political authority in the Central African Republic (CAR) three years after the outbreak of its latest conflict episode is a positive breakthrough, but no panacea. After a rocky transitional period during which the administration of Catherine Samba-Panza struggled to fulfil its mandate amid intermittent ministerial reshuffles and sporadic security backlashes, the new government of President Faustin-Archange Touadéra has the unenviable task of putting the country back on track. Unable to shoulder the burden of conflict on its own, the CAR will require sustained international support for years to come.

The authorities will have to prioritise three main areas: the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of dispersed armed groups; the restoration of (progressively decentralised) government institutions; and the launching of a justice and reconciliation programme to address widespread impunity. For this to materialise, the UN multidimensional integrated stabilisation mission (MINUSCA) and other international partners will have to adapt to new realities. Beyond the capital Bangui – where inter-communal tensions and bouts of lawlessness endure – swathes of territory are still controlled by splinter remnants of the ex-Séléka and anti-Balaka, the coalitions of armed combatants responsible for much of the violence since the conflict erupted. Meanwhile,

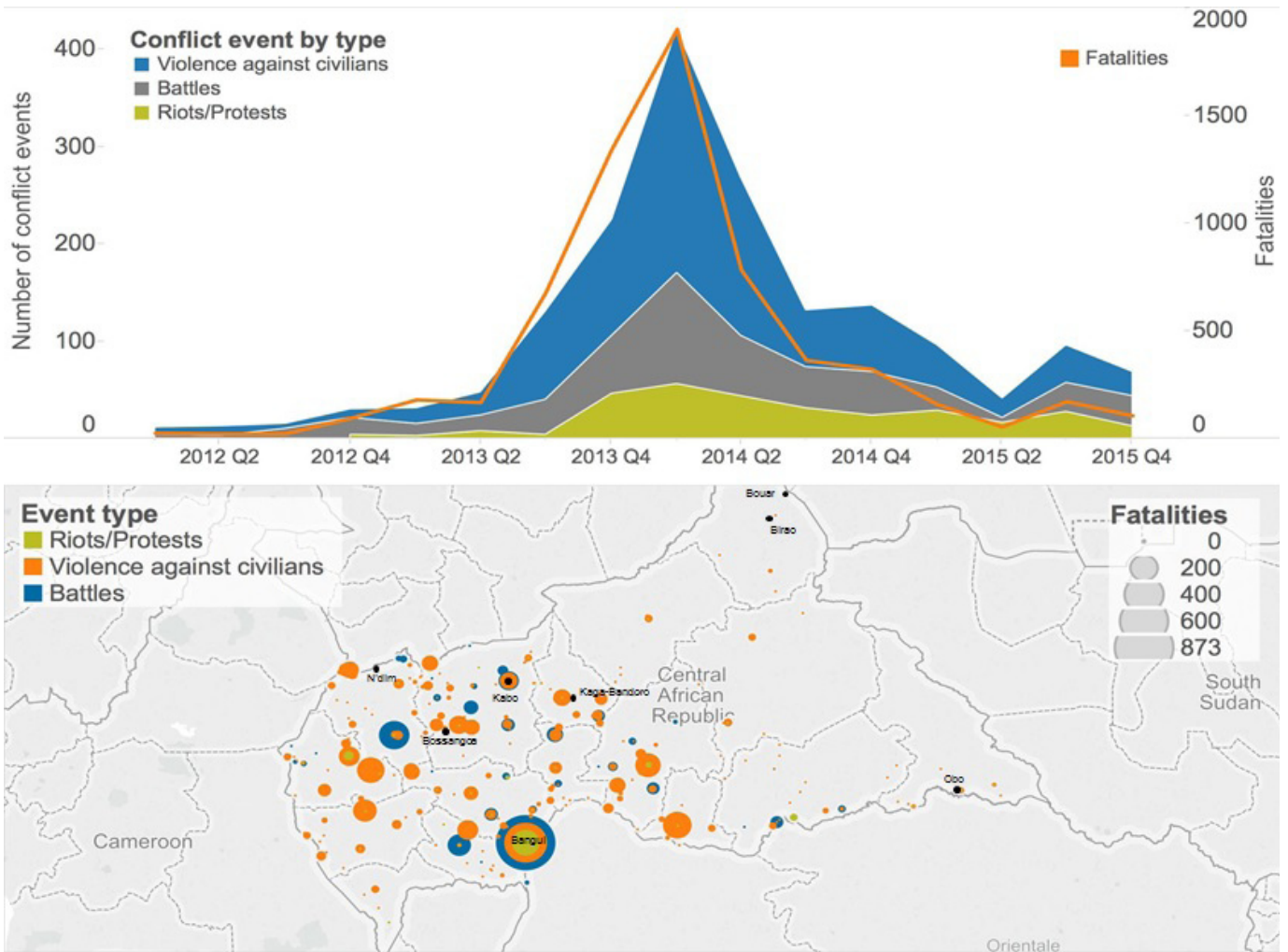
the rebel group the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) has been abducting and attacking civilians in the south-eastern regions at an increased rate since the start of the year.

While the security environment remains unpredictable, the prospect of a full withdrawal of the French *Operation Sangaris* by the end of the year has prompted MINUSCA to consider revamping its mandate, particularly so that it is able to address any potential surges in violence akin to those witnessed in late 2015. For its part, the deployment of an EU training mission (EUTM CAR) is poised to play a key role in the reform of the country's security sector. The mission's mandate is to turn the country's armed forces – *Forces armées centrafricaines* (FACA) – into a more professional, representative and democratically accountable actor, a task of paramount importance given the institution's repeated involvement in past conflict relapses.

The conflict's toll

Since the seizure of Bangui by the (then) Séléka alliance in late December 2012, the CAR's population, social fabric and economy have all suffered damaging blows. In a conflict that has taken on a myriad of dimensions (political, sectarian and economic), an estimated 6,300 fatalities have been reported as

Conflict events and fatalities in the CAR



Data source: ACLED (2016)

direct consequences of armed clashes, deadly inter-communal fighting and attacks against civilians.

According to UN estimates, the conflict has resulted in 421,283 internally displaced persons (IDPs) and a further 460,000 fleeing (principally) to Cameroon, Chad and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Some 2.3 million (50% of the population) are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance, and 2.7 million are considered to be facing food insecurity at a time when only 55% of the health facilities in the country are functioning. Although much of the violence in Bangui and provincial hotspots has largely subsided (bringing the number of recorded incidents and fatalities close to pre-conflict levels), criminality within the capital or armed groups operating along main transport routes and border areas remain serious obstacles for the delivery of humanitarian relief.

In a country where 80% of the population is dependent on agriculture and mining, the conflict has had a devastating effect on livelihoods. In comparison to pre-conflict levels, the World Food Programme

estimates that cereal production has fallen by 70% and cattle stock by 46%, while the production of coffee and cotton (CAR's main cash crops) has dropped by 28% and 42%, respectively. The diamond industry, which previously accounted for 57% of export earnings and 20% of government revenue, has largely been hampered due to the ban imposed by the Kimberly Process – a global verification consortium formed to freeze the outflow of precious stones from conflict zones.

With up to 30% of diamonds reportedly having been smuggled out of the country since 2013, there is an urgent need to restore control over the extractive sector, particularly as economic growth has largely faltered amid a widening current account deficit. With expenditure exceeding revenue, international budget support remains crucial for the government to revive its fiscal base and make headway in its security and political reform programmes. However, as of late May, the €145.2 million in external financial contributions pledged for 2016 continued to have a funding gap of around 50%, while unpaid assessed



contributions for MINUSCA amounted to €122.3 million. While the CAR awaits a pledged extended credit facility (ECF) by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to support economic reforms, pressure has continued to mount on its international partners to release extra funds to address pressing security matters more swiftly.

Silencing the guns?

As highlighted by the mid-April attack launched by ex-Séléka militants in N'dim and an armed assault on a *Médecins Sans Frontières* driver in Bossangoa in May, disparate pockets of violence have continued to appear in the wake of the legislative and presidential elections. Rumours have also circulated that ex-Séléka elements from Kabo are regrouping with fellow combatants in the northern town of Kaga-Bandoro, while anti-Balaka elements remain dispersed in the southwestern and central provinces of the country.

Meanwhile, according to the UN, the LRA has reportedly been responsible for 42 incidents this year, with 6 civilians killed and 252 abducted since January. It has been increasingly active in the mining areas around the town of Obo, where President Touadéra recently met representatives of the African Union (AU) Regional Task Force and MINUSCA to discuss counter-LRA efforts. Moreover, the protracted agropastoral conflict along the Chadian border remains a source of insecurity: ex-Séléka elements are allegedly involved in raiding and taxing transiting livestock, while a new self-defence group (predominantly herders from the Muslim Peul community) has recently emerged to protect cattle against attacks from anti-Balaka groups north of Bouar.

Although the operational capacity of armed groups has seemingly been reduced, their continued activities – compounded by the ongoing trans-border influx of weapons through Cameroon – remains a source for concern. Nevertheless, the Bangui Forum agreement on DDR (signed by the transitional government and nine armed groups in May 2015) has laid the ground for major pre-DDR initiatives, including the controlled disposition of weapons, the integration of former combatants (not charged with war crimes) into the state security apparatus or the release of child soldiers.

With €25.2 million in funding from the World Bank, MINUSCA is currently collecting the weapons (in exchange for food support) of an estimated 7,000 ex-combatants in high-risk areas. Thus far, more than 2,400 have surrendered their weapons in places like Bangui, Birao or Bouar. Alongside cash-for-work and income-generating projects, MINUSCA has also been coordinating a variety of community violence-

reduction programmes, with a €17.7 million budget targeting 70,000 beneficiaries.

Despite encouraging progress, implementing a full-blown (nationwide) DDR programme could, however, encounter several difficulties. Chief among them could be the failure to attract sufficient international funding for the task, and a prospective donor conference this November in Brussels will prove crucial for mobilising resources for the security sector. In addition, the fact that two major ex-Séléka factions (led by Nourredine Adam and Abdoulaye Miskine) rejected the DDR agreement is worrying, particularly as it could encourage other groups to backtrack on their commitments. Moreover, the controversial issue of amnesty will no doubt determine the readiness of rebel combatants' commitment to disarm, as looming indictments for war crimes or crimes against humanity will, of course, act as disincentives.

Past DDR experiences have demonstrated the dangers of politically co-opting rebel leaders. While Touadéra's decision not to include any members of armed groups in his administration has been praised, it has also generated resentment among those with political aspirations. Indeed, in late May ex-Séléka factions threatened to reunify unless the government awarded them cabinet positions.

Notwithstanding this political conundrum, without an institutional mechanism to punish crimes (including the illicit trafficking of minerals) certain armed groups will have insufficient incentives to surrender their arms. This time around, however, popular disgruntlement over widespread impunity has become more politicised – as evidenced during the civil society consultations in the run-up to the Bangui Forum – and will need to be addressed as part of a renewed nation-building project.

Nation-building redux

As a country largely characterised by the centralisation of political power and economic activity in and around Bangui, the failure to deliver on public services and the rule of law outside of the capital has long been a symptom of poor governance, which, in turn, has been exacerbated by patronage politics. Consequently, promoting the return of government agencies, civil servants and security forces to the 14 administrative prefectures needs to be translated into concrete action. Currently, efforts are being led by MINUSCA and UNDP in assisting the ministry of territorial administration in redeploying an estimated 1,000 civil servants across the country, with 427 of them already registered in six prefectures. This is in line with President's Touadéra's pledge to promote a gradual decentralisation of political power

– a promise which is likely to be fulfilled given his party's majority in Parliament.

Meanwhile, international efforts led by MINUSCA (in cooperation with the ministry of justice) have been underpinned by an 'emergency strategic plan' to rehabilitate the rule of law across the country. Outside of the capital, provincial courts remain dysfunctional, as magistrates are either absent or unwilling to sentence wrongdoers due to fear of retaliation. This has underlined the need to redeploy police personnel throughout the country to accompany judges and prosecutors. With the financial support of the EU and AU, MINUSCA has been able to train 2,689 police and gendarmerie officers in matters such as public order management and criminal investigation. This has facilitated MINUSCA's efforts in installing judiciary officials in 24 out of 28 general jurisdiction courts.

Although progress on the judicial front is underway, the decision to establish a special criminal court (SCC) is still pending. In the meantime, the International Criminal Court (ICC) has launched its own investigations into war crimes and crimes against humanity in the CAR – but has yet to issue any arrest warrants. Beyond bringing ex-combatants facing criminal charges to trial, the Touadéra administration will have to prosecute former government officials and members of the military over widespread accusations of embezzlement, particularly during the Bozizé presidency. The crimes committed by foreign (mainly Chadian and Sudanese) mercenaries, as well as allegations of sexual abuse by UN peacekeepers and other international soldiers will also have to be addressed.

In line with UNSC Resolution 2127 (2013), calls have been made for national authorities to investigate all of the alleged abuses and to hold perpetrators accountable. But it may well undermine DDR initiatives and a much-awaited reconciliation process by inciting conflict spoilers to respond with retaliatory violence. Such prospects have spurred international partners to bolster operational assistance to prevent future derailments, while keeping the changing security environment in mind.

Adapting international support

In late April, the UN Security Council (UNSC) extended MINUSCA's mandate until 31 July 2016. Noting the post-transitional challenges ahead, the resolution called for a strategic review to be conducted by MINUSCA (in consultation with the government) to ensure that a new mission mandate is adapted to the new post-transitional environment. Pending its presentation to the UNSC on 22 June,

the main recommendations of the strategic review will likely be focused on strengthening MINUSCA's security capabilities, particularly with regard to the protection of civilians. This comes in the wake of MINUSCA's alleged failure to contain the outbreak of violence in Bangui last September, which led to the deaths of nearly 80 people.

Although measures have been taken such as sending additional troops to the capital, changing MINUSCA's command structures or reinforcing the arms embargo, the UN's reach outside of the capital is still limited. As long as MINUSCA's presence in the eastern prefectures remains insufficient, securing the safe return of IDPs (particularly those of the Muslim community) will be difficult. With the need to respond to evolving threats like the LRA, MINUSCA would benefit from a rapid response mechanism to allow for temporary detachments to address immediate security incidents.

In addition, the mission would benefit from deploying more police forces outside of the capital. With police to population ratios in places like Bria reaching 1:15,675 (thereby far exceeding the UN recommended 1:500), the need for greater numbers of police and gendarmerie is crucial for restoring order beyond Bangui, particularly given the eventual drawdown of the 900-strong *Operation Sangaris* by December 2016.

With international concerns over the premature re-deployment of the armed forces in the wake of the elections, calls have been made to move forward with a security sector reform (SSR) programme. The recent transformation of the EU military advisory mission (EUMAM CAR) into EUTM CAR has therefore been welcomed. Given that the FACA are notorious for their sectarian composition and high degree of complicity with political authorities, the need to reform the military has become ever more urgent, particularly given its involvement in past conflict episodes – notably the September 2015 Bangui flare-up. Mandated for a 26-month period, EUTM CAR will be smaller in scope than EUTM Mali but regional forces will step in to provide training for regular forces, as is the case with EUTM Somalia.

Should SSR efforts succeed in transforming the FACA into an inclusive, non-politicised and democratically accountable institution, the taming of one of the most notorious conflict spoilers at a time when stabilisation efforts are starting to take hold would be an important achievement.

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