

Central African Republic is descending into anarchy Al-Jazeera America

Thierry Vircoulin

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Regional neighbors should have done more to maintain the peace

Since the March 24 coup by the Seleka, a loose coalition of Muslim rebels, the Central African Republic has been in free fall. There are about 400,000 internally displaced people, 64,000 refugees, and burned villages, largely in the western part of the country. Banditry, the rise of self-defense militias and clashes between Christian and Muslim communities are now part of daily life for this mineral-rich country in the heart of Africa. The expanding insecurity makes the delivery of humanitarian assistance difficult, and the United Nations has even warned of the risk of genocide.

Michel Djotodia, the leader of the Seleka, hails from the northeast and was the leader of the Union des Forces Démocratiques pour le Rassemblement (UFDR), one of the armed groups that have challenged the central government since 2007. He is now president of the transition.

The Seleka's main objective in its move was ousting then-President Francois Bozize. (...)

Since this year's coup occurred, what was supposed to be a three-year process toward a new political order has turned into anarchy. Today Seleka rebels are looting the capital city, Bangui. Djotodia officially dissolved them in September, but even before this formal act, the Seleka was a tenuous coalition. (...) Seleka fighters roam independently, and some commanders have become warlords. The armed groups are now roving bandits and have triggered local self-defense forces and anti-Muslim reactions because of their exactions against the population, notably in the western part of the country, Bozize's former fiefdom. In exile, shuttling back and forth between Africa and Europe, Bozize is wanted by the CAR's attorney general and has stated that he intends to come back by force.

This rapid decline in security has been accompanied by the complete collapse of state institutions and the rise of religious tensions. After those institutions had been eroding for decades, the coup sealed their fate: State security services vanished into thin air, civil servants fled and basic services stopped. For the CAR, it was the coup

de trop

— the final push.

In the five months after the March coup, the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and France, a former colonial power and the only Western country with troops stationed in the CAR, adopted a wait-and-see approach. (...)

(...) Recent violence in the western CAR between Seleka fighters and self-defense militias and between Christians and Muslims is, however, a wake-up call. As a result, the long-standing peaceful religious coexistence in a country where Muslims represent between 10 and 20 percent of the population is in jeopardy. The United Nations, ECCAS, the African Union (AU), France and the United States now realize that they cannot afford a new failed state on the continent. But they have yet to articulate an effective response to the highest priority, the swift restoration of law and order.

Prevention of a crisis is much better than a cure — and much cheaper.

(...) Nonetheless, the current collapse could have been avoided. After the Seleka armed groups arrived at the doorstep of the capital last December, the Mission for the Consolidation of Peace in Central African Republic, or MICOPAX — an African peacekeeping force deployed by ECCAS and backed by a French military mission since 2008 — was reinforced and tasked with protecting Bangui. In an unexpected move that was interpreted as a direct show of support for the very weak Bozize regime, South Africa swiftly deployed its forces to Bangui. ECCAS also sponsored the Libreville agreement, signed on Jan. 11 by Bozize, the democratic opposition parties and rebel leaders, which led to a government of national unity. At the beginning of this year, the rebels were militarily contained by MICOPAX and politically accommodated. (...)

But this optimism was short-lived. First, among the rebels and the democratic opposition, skepticism grew over whether the political agreement would be implemented. Bozize seemed ever less likely to share power. He dragged his feet to set up an inclusive government, made many decisions unilaterally and rearmed. His anti-Muslim speeches further stirred tension.

Second, other signatories to the Libreville agreement, particularly the ECCAS countries, became dissatisfied with Bozize. They had financially supported his bankrupt regime for years and were instrumental in negotiating the political agreement and stopping the rebels. Bozize's attempt to sabotage the negotiated transition by inviting South Africa, an outsider, into the regional power play precipitated the crisis. Despite its interposition mandate, the African peacekeeping force did not prevent the rebels from marching on Bangui. (...)

Lessons from the crisis

What does the CAR crisis mean for African peace and security?

First, the AU's peace and security architecture works only when there is regional consensus on the political solution required to solve a crisis. ECCAS had enough political leverage to impose a negotiated solution and could have successfully managed a certain level of military threat. However, its lack of political consensus led to military failure, as demonstrated by the uncoordinated South African army deployment.

Second, African peacekeeping capacities are still too thin and need external support. Given that ECCAS was not able or willing to reach the target of 2,000 troops, the AU stepped in to transform the ECCAS-led mission into an AU-led peacekeeping mission to the Central African Republic — MISCA. But the AU is bumping into the same problems: funding, logistics and human resources. The transformation of a Central African regional mission into one led by the AU allows for larger troop contributions from across the continent, but the AU is unable to foot the bill and provide much-needed logistics. This is why the United Nations and the European Union are now [deliberating](#) on possible international support to MISCA.

Third, prevention of a crisis is much better than a cure — and much cheaper. The CAR crisis is like a boomerang that has returned to strike ECCAS countries. Insecurity is rife on the border with Cameroon, and it may spread to other neighboring countries. If ECCAS countries had only anticipated the consequences of giving free passage to rebels to march on Bangui, they would have acted to prevent the coup and the subsequent mayhem.

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