I. Introduction

Often referred to as the “forgotten” conflict, violence in the Central African Republic (CAR) has risen to extreme levels ever since a coup d’état in early March 2013 sent the nation into wholesale unrest in CAR.
that proceeded to take a sectarian turn in the following months. Though the leadership that had assumed power after the coup stepped down in early 2014, human rights abuses have continued to be committed in the CAR, with accusations from some that the evolution into violence between Christians and Muslims could elevate this crisis to the level of genocide. The history of precarious governance in the CAR, coupled with the current volatile situation, has raised concern for the future of the nation, and has led many to confirm the CAR government’s failure to uphold its Responsibility to Protect (RtoP).

II. History of Instability

Though the CAR gained independence from France in 1960, its people have experienced repeated bouts of political instability. In particular, the country has been subjected to five separate coups d’état, the first of which occurred in 1965, when President David Dacko was overthrown by Colonel Jean-Bedel Bokassa. Following years of additional unrest under the Bokassa regime, Ange-Felix Patasse became president in 1993. The democratically-elected Patasse stayed in power for a decade, until he was ousted by former army chief of staff Francois Bozize in March 2003.

Upon seizing the presidency, Bozize suspended the country’s Constitution and dissolved the National Assembly. Though he promised to step
down after an initial transitional period to democracy, Bozize was reelected in 2005 and began calling for national unity, development, and democratic freedom. A peace deal known as the Birao Peace Agreement, which was signed in 2007 between the government of the CAR and the rebel group Union des Forces Démocratiques pour le Rassemblement (Union of Democratic Forces Coalition – UFDR), appeared to solidify Bozize’s intentions. Further progress was seemingly made with the 2008 Libreville Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which, in addition to the UFDR, also included the rebel groups Armée Populaire pour la Restauration de la Démocratie (People’s Army for the Restoration of Democracy – APRD) and the Front démocratique du Peuple Centrafricain (Democratic Front for the People of the Central African Republic – FDPC) in its negotiations. Together, these deals promised amnesty; disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programs for former combatants; and political power-sharing.

Yet, the fragility of these peace deals was soon evident. In 2010, the Bozize regime came under fire from opposition leaders who announced their intention to boycott the January 2011 elections in light of institutional changes affecting the voter registration process. When Bozize was reelected in 2011, his victory was shrouded by allegations of election fraud that further threatened the already-declining security situation in the CAR. The Bozize government’s inability to demobilize rebels and ex-soldiers, along with such foreign involvement as a February 2012 joint offensive between troops from the CAR and neighboring Chad (which sought to weaken a Chadian rebel movement and left thousands of civilians displaced) added to growing instability throughout the country.

III. March 2013 Coup d’Etat

In December 2012, a loose rebel coalition named the Seleka
initiated a military campaign to overthrow Bozize’s government. The Seleka, mainly composed of factions of armed groups in northeastern CAR, including the UFDR and FDPC, as well as the Convention Patriotique pour le Salut Wa Kodro (CPSK) and the Convention of Patriots for Justice and Peace (Convention des Patriotes pour la Justice et la Paix – CPJP), criticized Bozize’s government for failing to implement the DDR program in the northeast, declining to investigate rebel and government crimes that had been occurring since 2005, and demonstrating a general lack of governance in its region. Capitalizing on the fact that the country had been “virtually ungoverned” outside of the capital, Bangui, for years, the Seleka rapidly captured several strategic towns in early 2013 and was poised to take Bangui next. A hasty intervention by Chad and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) instead persuaded the Seleka to negotiate with Bozize’s government. The result of these negotiations was the Libreville Agreement of January 2013, which established a three-year power-sharing arrangement in the CAR. In addition, it stipulated that Bozize would remain in office until 2016, but that he would not be allowed to run for a third term beyond that.

Unfortunately, however, the Libreville Agreement was made between regional heads of state rather than heads of warring parties in the CAR, which, as the Council on Foreign Relations noted, increased the difficulty of implementing real change because it neglected to consider the “intricacies” of the conflict. Another issue, as an Al Jazeera article points out, was that the African Union (AU) played but a marginal role in the Libreville negotiations. Ultimately, ECCAS failed
The government’s failure to carry out agreements under the 2013 Libreville Agreement generated anger and frustration on the part of the Seleka, who, sensing a strategic advantage on the ground, resurged and took control of Bangui and fifteen of the CAR’s sixteen provinces on 24 March 2013, a move which simultaneously caused Bozize to flee to Cameroon. Upon seizing the capital, Seleka leader Michel Djotodia proclaimed himself President and suspended CAR’s constitution. Rather than recognizing Djotodia as President, a hurried ECCAS Summit on 4 April 2013 called for the creation of a Transitional National Council (TNC), which would create a new constitution, conduct elections in eighteen months, and select an interim President. On 13 April, the TNC ultimately chose Djotodia as interim president, given that he was the sole candidate vying for the position.

Djotodia’s leadership was immediately criticized at the international level, as his Seleka fighters were accused of having used child soldiers in their successful overthrow of the Bozize government, as well as having engaged in the looting of villages, the raping and killing of civilians, and the abduction of members of the national army. Continued violence on the part of the Seleka even after Djotodia took office raised additional questions about the security situation in the CAR.

IV. From Political to Sectarian Violence: Ex-Seleka and Anti-Balaka
Given Djotodia’s unconventional assumption of power, the future of the CAR immediately following the installation of its new transitional government remained uncertain. While Djotodia’s government took a positive step in May 2013 when it indicted Bozize for crimes against humanity committed during his tenure, it failed to extend this concern for human rights abuses to the Seleka. Some hoped that Djotodia’s surprise move to dissolve the Seleka in September 2013 meant that he was taking the first step in reasserting the authority of the state by separating his government from Seleka members who had continually committed atrocities in the field. Indeed, a statement from his office declared that anyone acting under the name of Seleka “would be punished.” However, others feared that the decision could plunge the country into even greater instability, as dissension between various factions of the former coalition could further weaken the transitional framework.

Unfortunately, these concerns proved all too accurate. Frustrated with incompetent law enforcement in the country that had allowed Seleka crimes to go unpunished, many civilians decided to form self-defense militias known as Anti-Balaka, in an effort to confront the Seleka’s abuses. Clashes between former Seleka members and these vigilante groups began in late September 2013 and dramatically intensified in December 2013, leaving thousands of people dead. Specifically, a massacre on 13 December 2013, which resulted in the deaths of twenty-seven Muslims in Bohong, as well as two more that occurred in January 2014 and claimed the lives of fifty Muslims, demonstrated that tension in the CAR had risen to a precarious level. A December 2013 Human Rights Watch (HRW) report also found more generally that Anti-Balaka groups were responsible for killing Seleka, burning their homes, and stealing their cattle, and that the Seleka was guilty of having violently retaliated against the Anti-Balaka. In the midst of this escalating violence, several soldiers from the CAR’s former national armed forces and Presidential Guard, who had remained loyal to
Crisis in CAR

Bozize, also began joining the Anti-Balaka ranks.

Though the Anti-Balaka groups were initially created as a civilian protection method, the fighting has since become more sectarian in nature, with some Anti-Balaka groups now targeting Muslims in response to reports that ex-Seleka have been terrorizing Christian communities. Ex-Seleka fighters have in turn been arming Muslim populations, allegedly with help from warlords in neighboring Chad and Sudan. Despite this development, however, it should be noted that the sectarian turn is a symptom rather than a cause of years of institutional decay and poor governance in the CAR. Journalist Michela Wrong further substantiates the concern of using such a “reductive” definition of conflict in the CAR, noting the “myriad and complex” political and socio-economical causes of violence that have led to the extreme nature of the current crisis.

In light of the increasing violence and his inability to stop or prevent it, President Djotodia resigned on 10 January 2014 at a two-day ECCAS summit. A week later, former mayor of Bangui Catherine Samba-Panza was elected as interim president of the CAR. Samba-Panza’s promises of peace and national unity have thus far resulted in a plan to reorganize the security forces in the CAR so that both Muslims and Christians will be protected from violence, along with efforts to appoint corruption-free government leaders. While it is too soon to assess the impact of Samba-Panza’s leadership on the crisis in the CAR, the first female president of the country has already been dubbed “the woman who would save Central Africa.” Elsewhere, a January 2014 UN report has suggested that Chadian citizens and peacekeepers are also responsible for mass killings in the CAR, a
discovery that adds yet another layer of difficulty for those seeking a peaceful resolution to this crisis. A 5 February 2014 article by Human Rights Watch (HRW) corroborates this issue, noting that many Seleka have been regrouping in northeastern CAR, and that Chadian peacekeepers are facilitating their movement while also committing human rights abuses.

Even more disturbing, on 12 February 2014, Amnesty International released a report in which it accused “international peacekeepers [of having] failed to prevent the ethnic cleansing of Muslim civilians in the western part of the Central African Republic.” Specifically, Amnesty documented how several Muslim localities were now completely empty of Muslims, and that small numbers of remaining Muslims in these towns had begun seeking refuge in churches and mosques. Human Rights Watch corroborated Amnesty’s stance by documenting how Muslims in the CAR had been forced to flee the country to escape violence. UN High Commissioner of Human Rights Antonio Guterres added his concern by calling the crisis in the CAR “a humanitarian catastrophe of unspeakable proportions” and warning that the CAR’s Muslims were facing massive “ethno-religious cleansing.” In response to these allegations, the government in the CAR stated on 17 February 2014 that it had arrested 11 Anti-Balaka officers and charged them with war crimes.

V. International Response

United Nations Security Council (UNSC), African Union (AU), and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS)

Since the initial stages of recent conflict in the CAR, the African Union (AU) has attempted to address the situation without international assistance. Its initial effort came through the establishment of the Mission for the Consolidation of Peace in Central African Republic (MICOPAX) upon the
The conclusion of the first Libreville Summit in October 2002. By 2008, MICOPAX had become the responsibility of the Economic Community of Central African States, or ECCAS. That same year, in response to increasing violence throughout the country, the AU also decided to send troops from the Multinational Force of Central Africa (FOMAC) into the CAR. However, the FOMAC troops were eventually overwhelmed by the Seleka violence that followed Djotodia’s installation as president in 2013.

On 10 October 2013, the Security Council met to amend the mandate of BINUCA, a UN field office in the CAR which has sought to “help consolidate peace, foster national reconciliation, and strengthen democratic institutions, as well as [strengthen] the promotion and protection of human rights.” At this point, many in the international community had hoped that the Security Council would also create a UN peacekeeping operation in the CAR. Unfortunately, Resolution 2121 – the result of the October 2013 meeting – only went so far as to reinforce and adjust the mandate of BINUCA. It did not permanently close discussions on the possibility of establishing a peacekeeping mission in the future, however, as it also required the Secretary-General to report to the Security Council within thirty days on its plans for the creation of an African-led International Support Mission in the CAR (known alternatively as AFISM-CAR, or MISCA), which “include[ed] the possible option of a transformation of MISCA into a United Nations peacekeeping operation.” In addition, Resolution 2121 further underscored “the primary responsibility of the Central African authorities to protect the population.”

A few weeks later, on 1 November 2013, the Security Council held an Arria Formula meeting in New York to discuss the "horrendous" situation in the CAR. In his statement to the Council that day, UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide Adama Dieng reaffirmed
that the widespread nature of human rights violations in the CAR could constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity. When speaking to the press after the meeting, Mr. Dieng further stressed that the increasingly inter-religious nature of the conflict concerned him, noting that "this will end with Christian communities, Muslim communities killing each other, which means that if we don't act now and decisively, I will not exclude the possibility of a genocide occurring."

On 15 November 2013, in compliance with the Security Council’s aforementioned request from October, the Secretary-General reported on five options for international support in the CAR. These options included: providing bilateral/multilateral support to MISCA; establishing a UN Trust Fund for assistance; creating a limited UN support package funded through assessed and voluntary contributions; implementing a comprehensive UN support package funded through assessed contributions; and, finally, transforming MISCA into a UN peacekeeping operation. According to Security Council Report, several UNSC members believed that a UN peacekeeping operation was both the “inevitable” and most viable solution. However, others wanted to support the AU’s desire to try its own independent peacekeeping force (MISCA) first.

As such, on 5 December 2013, the Security Council adopted Resolution 2127 under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. The Resolution recognized the Transitional Authorities’ primary responsibility to protect the population of the CAR, and simultaneously authorized the deployment of MISCA and an additional contingent of French troops to take all necessary measures to contribute to the protection of civilians, the stabilization of the country, and the restoration of State authority, among others. In addition, the Resolution imposed a sanctions regime on the CAR, which included a year-long arms embargo by Member States, accompanied by the Security Council’s “strong intent to swiftly consider imposing targeted measures, including travel bans and assets freezes, against individuals who act to undermine the peace, stability and security” in the nation, and again asked the Secretary-General to report to the Council in three months on options for transforming MISCA into a peacekeeping operation.
Two days later, on 7 December, the AU announced that it would increase its troop levels to 6,000. France also decided to deploy 1,600 troops to the CAR for six months, as authorized under Resolution 2127. The French mission, known as Operation Sangaris, has agreed to work alongside African troops and assist efforts to disarm rebel factions throughout the CAR. However, Operation Sangaris has been criticized for focusing on the ex-Seleka to the detriment of giving the Anti-Balaka the freedom to continue its violent activities.

On 19 December 2013, the AU subsequently authorized the deployment of 3,600 troops under the auspices of MISCA, which effectively took over from MICOPAX. While this added more security on the ground, MISCA’s numbers were judged to be insufficient by many. In addition, MISCA has also struggled to implement effective DDR programs and reform security measures in the CAR, as evidenced in continued rounds of fighting.

After meeting on 22 January 2014 to discuss developments in the crisis in the CAR, the UNSC proceeded to adopt Resolution 2134 on 28 January, which authorized the deployment of a European Union (EU) force and called for enforcement of sanctions against the CAR. On 16 February, 2014, the EU announced that it would be sending troops into CAR in March, and France stated it would also be sending in an additional 400 soldiers.

Importantly, after much delay the Security Council passed Resolution 2149 authorizing a 10,000-strong peacekeeping operation, including 1,800 police personnel, known as the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African
Republic (MINUSCA). MINUSCA includes a protection of civilians mandate, human rights component, and support for accountability measures.

United Nations Office of the Special Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide (OSAPG)

On 1 October 2013, UN Special Advisers on the Prevention of Genocide, Mr. Adama Dieng, and the Responsibility to Protect, Dr. Jennifer Welsh, both issued a statement expressing their serious concern for the situation in the CAR. Noting that “the breakdown of law and order and the apparent inability of the transitional authorities to exercise control over Seleka soldiers committing atrocities could presage a deepening crisis and a return to large-scale fighting,” the Special Advisers warned that these and other risk factors, such as religious tensions, have “opened the door to the risk of atrocity crimes.” On 22 January 2014, Dieng delivered a statement to the Security Council, (only the third time in which the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide had briefed the Council in an official meeting) wherein he affirmed that “the primary responsibility for the protection of [the CAR’s] populations lies with the Central African authorities,” but also added that “the international community must take concrete measures to assist the State to stop the abuses and protect the civilian populations.” Despite the fact that the international community was responding belatedly, he added that “there is still a window to act to mobilize appropriate resources and to reverse one of the worst human rights and humanitarian crises of our time.”

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)

The human rights abuses by the ex-Seleka, combined with the clashes between ex-Seleka fighters and the anti-Balaka forces, have led to a rapid deterioration of the humanitarian situation. After returning from a trip to the CAR on 29 October 2013, Director of UN Humanitarian Operations John Ging declared that “the number one issue today is protection, and the atrocities that are being committed against the civilian population are indescribable.” According to the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), as of 3 January 2014,
935,000 people, or 1/5 of the CAR’s entire population, had been displaced, with another 233,000 in neighboring countries.

United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)  On 12 September 2013, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay presented a report on the situation in the CAR, pursuant to the Human Rights Council’s request made earlier that year. The Report concludes that between 10 December 2012 to 23 March 2013, and after the 24 March coup, both the Bozize government and Seleka leaders had “engaged in summary executions and extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, torture and looting of private and public property,” and that the Seleka had also committed crimes of sexual violence and crimes against children.

Several months later, in a statement released on 27 January 2014, High Commissioner Pillay further highlighted the deteriorating security situation in the CAR by referencing in particular her concern for the “proliferation of armed groups and the explosion of common criminality” throughout the country.

International Criminal Court (ICC)

The prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC), Fatou Bensouda, joined others in expressing her alarm over the situation in the CAR on 9 December 2013, imploring all parties (including both ex-Seleka and anti-Balaka elements) to “stop attacking civilians and committing crimes, or risk being investigated and prosecuted by my Office.” On 7 February 2014, Bensouda announced that the ICC would be opening an investigation on possible war crimes and crimes against humanity that had been occurring in the CAR.

VI. Civil Society Response  As noted in previous sections, the 2013 coup itself has led to grave consequences for the civilians of the CAR, a nation that has devolved into a state of “near-anarchy.”

In November 2013, UNICEF reaffirmed that the entire population of 4.6 million people had been affected by the conflict in some capacity. According to the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), the International
Federation of Human Rights (FIDH), and Human Rights Watch (HRW), Seleka fighters have committed numerous war crimes, such as torturing civilians for money, deliberately destroying over 1,000 homes, looting villages, raping women and girls, stealing or decimating food stocks, and intentionally killing hundreds of civilians. Worse, victims have no recourse to medical or emergency services, as the CAR’s entire civilian administrative state has become virtually non-existent. Many observers have reported the use of child soldiers by armed factions in the country, a practice that had been a persistent problem in the CAR even before the coup. In addition, the UNHRC and HRW have found evidence indicating that the Bozize government also engaged in summary executions, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, torture, and looting, both while the regime was power and during the 2013 conflict.

Several civil society groups have also been disappointed with the Council’s failure to authorize a UN peacekeeping operation. For example, FIDH has urged the Security Council to authorize the UN to take over from MISCA, noting that MISCA “does not have the capacity or expertise to deal with the crimes being committed on a gross and systematic scale in the CAR, including increasing inter-communal and religious violence.” On 2 December, Amnesty International also agreed with the need to start preparations for the deployment of a UN peacekeeping force, arguing that “if the Security Council does not act now to stem the horrific cycle of violence in the Central African Republic, that failure will hang heavily on the international community for years to come.”

Declaring that a more substantial UN presence was needed, the Global Centre for RtoP has also stated that the MISCA and French operations should only be an interim step towards the deployment of a UN peacekeeping mission.

On 20 December 2013, Philippe Bolopion of Human Rights Watch (HRW) stated that the crisis in CAR was facing its “
R2P moment of truth,
and that while the international community was able to identify particular warning signs of the conflict, it had yet to fulfill its responsibility to protect the terrorized citizens in the country.

Special thanks to Michelle Rae Eberhard for her work in writing this page.