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The Central African Republic: Background and U.S. Policy

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Summary

The Central African Republic (CAR) is emerging from a crisis that began when rebels overthrew the national government in 2013, ushering in a chaotic and violent period. A new president, Faustin Archange Touadéra, was elected in 2016, but gains remain fragile. Militias that have targeted civilians on the basis of religious and ethnic identity continue to operate in much of the country, posing challenges to governance, reconciliation, and accountability. Violence has caused large population displacements, weakening an already tiny economy and placing strains on finite international aid and peacekeeping resources.

U.S. responses to the crisis in CAR have included:

- humanitarian assistance;
- aid funding for conflict mitigation, peacebuilding, and rule-of-law programs;
- diplomatic and financial support for a U.N. peacekeeping operation, MINUSCA;
- additional support for African and French troops that have deployed to CAR;
- public diplomacy initiatives; and
- targeted financial and travel sanctions against actors viewed as fueling conflict.

Key issues for the 115th Congress include the authorization, appropriation, and oversight of U.S. aid and peacekeeping funding and of U.S. policy toward CAR. The context for these considerations will depend to some extent on the approach of the incoming Donald Trump Administration to CAR and regional issues. The situation in CAR also has implications for several broad policy challenges in which Congress has displayed interest:

- political stability in the wider central Africa region;
- U.S. efforts to counter the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a small but brutal militia active in eastern CAR and neighboring countries;
- the U.S. role in preventing and addressing "mass atrocities" in foreign countries;
- trends in wildlife poaching and other cross-border criminal activity in the region;
- religious freedom in Africa; and
- the effectiveness of U.N. peacekeeping and responses to peacekeeper abuses.

The FY2016 Consolidated Appropriations Act (P.L. 114-113) provided that funding appropriated for aid to CAR "shall be made available for reconciliation and peacebuilding programs, including activities to promote inter-faith dialogue at the national and local levels, and for programs to prevent crimes against humanity." A similar provision is included in H.R. 5912 (Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2017), and similar provisions were enacted in prior foreign aid appropriations measures. The FY2016 Act also provided funding for assisting civilians in LRA-affected areas, such as southeastern CAR, as did prior aid appropriations measures. Other relevant legislation enacted in the 114th Congress includes the Eliminate, Neutralize, and Disrupt Wildlife Trafficking Act of 2016 (P.L. 114-231). The 113th Congress held several hearings on CAR in the House and Senate.

The Obama Administration allocated an estimated \$14 million in bilateral aid for CAR in FY2016 and requested \$18 million for FY2017—not including emergency humanitarian aid and other regionally- and centrally-managed funds, such as conflict-mitigation and LRA-related assistance. The Administration also allocated an estimated \$287 million from FY2016 appropriations for U.S. assessed contributions to MINUSCA's budget. The United States is by far the largest bilateral humanitarian donor in CAR, with over \$99 million in funding provided in FY2016.

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Overview

The Central African Republic (CAR) has struggled to emerge from conflict and state collapse since 2013, when a rebel movement known as the Seleka seized control of the government. Seleka was led by Muslim combatants with ties to CAR's northeastern border region. "Anti-balaka" ("anti-machete" or "anti-bullet") militias were formed in response and fought the Seleka and Muslims in general. The ensuing conflict featured widespread violence against civilians and the disintegration of already weak institutions. Violence has waned since 2013-2014, but periodic flare-ups continue to undermine social cohesion, government stability, and the return of displaced populations. CAR has never had an effective central government exercising authority over its full national territory, and there have been recurrent insurgencies and army mutinies since the 1990s.

In early 2016, CAR completed national elections and a transition from an interim government that had led the country since 2014. Faustin Archange Touadéra, a former prime minister who had cultivated a discreet public profile, was elected president. His inauguration marked CAR's second democratic transfer of power since independence from France in 1960, and the convening of a new National Assembly in May 2016 formally brought the political transition period to a close. Donors are now attempting to support the new government while balancing policy concerns (such as ties between the military and anti-balaka groups) and competing global demands for humanitarian and peacekeeping resources.

As during past crises in CAR, international forces have deployed since 2013 in an effort to stabilize the country. The U.N. Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in CAR (MINUSCA), established in 2014, absorbed a previous African-led military force. MINUSCA is mandated to protect civilians, support reconciliation and the extension of state authority, assist security sector reform efforts, facilitate humanitarian aid, and in some situations implement "urgent temporary measures ... to arrest and detain in order to maintain basic law and order and fight impunity." Starting in late 2013, France deployed Operation Sangaris to disarm militias and secure the capital, Bangui. The mission, with over 2,000 troops at its peak, ended in October 2016, but France is expected to maintain a rapid-reaction force and security cooperation program. The European Union (EU) deployed some 750 soldiers to help secure Bangui in 2014-2015, and subsequently established a military advisory mission ("EUMAM") to support reforms.

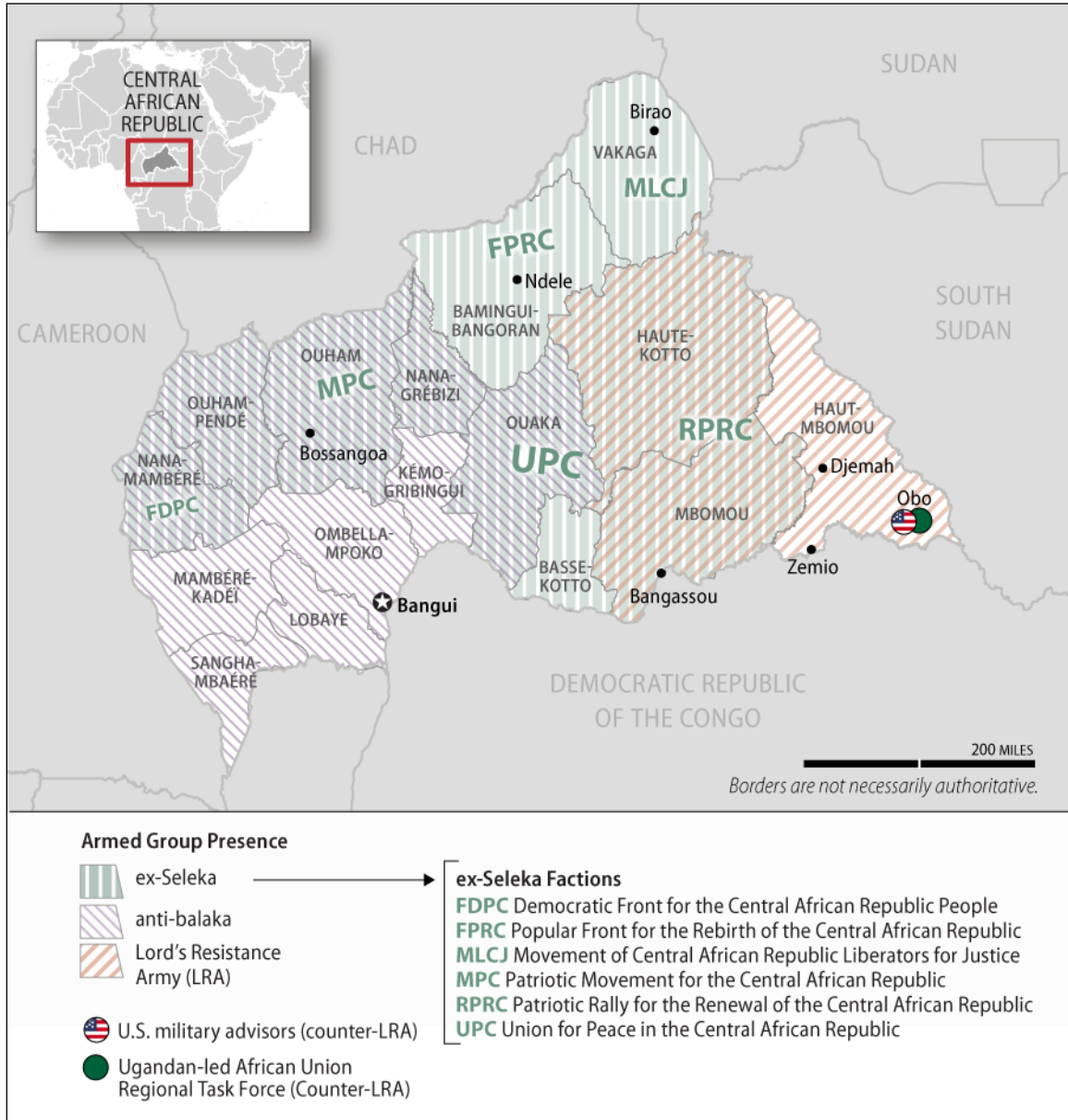
CAR remains fragile, and President Touadéra has been slow to advance initiatives that could bring greater stability. State institutions remain absent from much of the country. Much of CAR's minority Muslim community has fled to the northeast or to neighboring countries. The Seleka movement has split into factions that have fought each other—and targeted civilians from ethnic communities associated with rival factions. All parties, including the military, have reportedly engaged in racketeering and extortion in their areas of influence. The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a small but brutal Ugandan-led militia, is active in the east, where it appears to have benefitted from CAR's recent instability. Domestic opposition to MINUSCA has been stoked by the mission's lack of capacity, by scandals involving alleged sexual abuse and exploitation by foreign troops, and by self-interested efforts by nativist politicians and activists.

U.N. agencies estimate that some 450,000 Central Africans are refugees in neighboring countries (compared to 152,500 as of mid-2012), while 385,000 are internally displaced—out of a total pre-conflict population of roughly 5 million.¹ Militia attacks on aid personnel have exacerbated an

¹ United Nations (U.N.) High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Central African Republic Regional Refugee Response*, September 10, 2016; USAID Complex Emergency Fact Sheet #2 for FY2012, September 30, 2012.

already dire humanitarian situation, in which some 2.4 million residents are reportedly in need of assistance. Economic activity has moderately improved since 2015, but real gross domestic product (GDP) remains below pre-conflict levels, and continued violence threatens to reverse limited gains. CAR was already one of the world’s poorest countries before the conflict, and it ranked 187 out of 188 countries on the 2015 U.N. Human Development Index.

Figure I. Central African Republic: Armed Group Presence



Source: CRS Graphic. Map generated by Hannah Fischer using data from Department of State (2016) and Esri, DeLorme, and ArcWorld (2014). Ex-Seleka and anti-balaka presence drawn from U.N. Panel of Experts reports, International Crisis Group publications, and other non-government sources. LRA presence drawn from LRA Crisis Tracker data.

Notes: Borders are not necessarily authoritative.

Current Issues for Policymakers

U.S. and other international policymakers are currently considering a range of questions regarding the response to the situation in CAR, including:

- To what extent should donors transition from emergency humanitarian assistance toward development aid for CAR? What level of support is appropriate?
- Who should plan and fund the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of former combatants? Which fighters should be eligible for either integration into the military or assistance with establishing civilian livelihoods?
- With the end of France's Operation Sangaris, to what extent should other international troops be prepared to fend off a renewed rebel assault on Bangui?
- How should the U.N. Security Council respond to the CAR government's repeated requests to lift a U.N. arms embargo so as to allow the CAR military (known as the FACA, after its French acronym) to rearm?² Given reported links between elements of the FACA and anti-balaka groups, should an end to the embargo be conditioned on requirements for human rights vetting and ethnic/religious balance? (See "Context," below.)
- To what extent should U.S. military advisors, who are in CAR to help counter the LRA, work with the FACA—particularly if the primary U.S. partner in counter-LRA operations, the Ugandan military, withdraws in the coming months? (See "Lord's Resistance Army Presence," below.)
- Should targeted sanctions designations be expanded or otherwise revised, and for what purposes? (See "U.S. Policy and Aid," below.)
- How, if at all, should U.N. Security Council members adjust MINUSCA's mandate in response to changing political and security conditions? What can or should U.N. member states do to improve MINUSCA's effectiveness and commitment to protecting civilians from violence? To improve U.N. efforts to prevent and punish sexual abuse and exploitation by peacekeepers in CAR? (See "MINUSCA: Current Issues," below.)
- How should donors balance a desire to support the Touadéra administration with concerns about its ties to sanctioned individuals such as ex-president Bozizé? (See "A New Government: Prospects and Challenges," below.)
- How should the CAR government and its international partners respond to recent efforts by some ex-Seleka leaders to reunite the movement?³
- What steps should the CAR government and its international partners take to encourage the return of displaced populations?
- To what extent should donors work to build up CAR's civilian security forces, such as police and corrections officers? What is the appropriate level of donor support for reconciliation and accountability measures, including a nascent Special Criminal Court designed to prosecute the gravest crimes since 2003?
- Should stakeholders support new Kimberley Process designations of areas from which diamond exports are cleared to resume? (See "The Economy," below.)

² See, e.g., President Touadéra remarks at the U.N. General Assembly, September 23, 2016.

³ RFI, "Centrafrique: la multiplication des violences menace l'avenir du pays," October 7, 2016.

Context

The contours of the conflict in CAR reflect complex tensions over access to resources, control over trade and financial networks, and national identity.⁴ Prior to the conflict, CAR's population was estimated to be 15% Muslim and 85% Christian or followers of indigenous beliefs. The Seleka ("alliance" in the local Sangho language) rebellion was founded in 2012 in northeastern CAR, and that region—home to many Muslim communities with cross-border ties to Chad and Sudan—remains the primary stronghold of ex-Seleka factions following the group's splintering in 2013-2014. At its inception, Seleka leaders appeared united by little other than a desire for power, looting, and revenge. Still, the movement drew on grassroots grievances among Muslims and northerners relating to perceived political exclusion, poor governance, and abuse under successive central administrations led by Christians from the south or northwest.⁵

For their part, the Christian- and animist-led anti-balaka groups that first organized in Bangui in late 2013, in response to the Seleka takeover, have drawn on popular anger at historic patterns of raiding (including slave-raids) by Muslims from the northeastern border area, and on frustrations with contemporary Muslim traders' prominence in commerce and the mineral sector. Politicization of religious identity rose under former President François Bozizé, who headed an evangelical church as president and has been implicated in supporting anti-balaka mobilization from exile.⁶ (Bozizé took power in a rebellion in 2003 and was deposed by the Seleka in 2013.) In a complex twist, Bozizé's reliance on Chadian combatants while in office may have further stoked nativist anger against residents with family ties to Chad, many of whom are Muslim.

Although religious ideology does not appear to have been at the heart of the CAR conflict, one result of these tensions has been brutal collective punishment based on sectarian identity. In 2013, Seleka commanders oversaw attacks on Christian communities, including massacres in the northwest—Bozizé's home region and political stronghold.⁷ By mid-2014, after the Seleka had been pushed out of power and the national military had effectively disbanded, anti-balaka groups gained the upper hand in much of the south and west, where they launched assaults on Muslim communities in religiously mixed areas. Ultimately, hundreds of thousands of Muslims fled their homes, Muslim-owned properties and businesses were looted and seized, mosques were destroyed, and Muslim religious practice was reportedly forcibly suppressed, including through forced conversions.⁸ In mid-2014, thousands of Muslims who had been forcibly confined to enclaves under international protection were evacuated, with international assistance, to the northeast or to neighboring countries.⁹ A U.N. commission of inquiry concluded that abuses by anti-balaka groups amounted to "ethnic cleansing" of CAR's Muslim community.¹⁰

⁴ See Louisa Lombard, "A Brief Political History of the Central African Republic," *Cultural Anthropology*, June 2014.

⁵ International Crisis Group (ICG), *The Central African Crisis: From Predation to Stabilization*, June 17, 2014.

⁶ Louisa Lombard, "Pervasive Mistrust Fuels C.A.R. Crisis," Al Jazeera online, April 11, 2014.

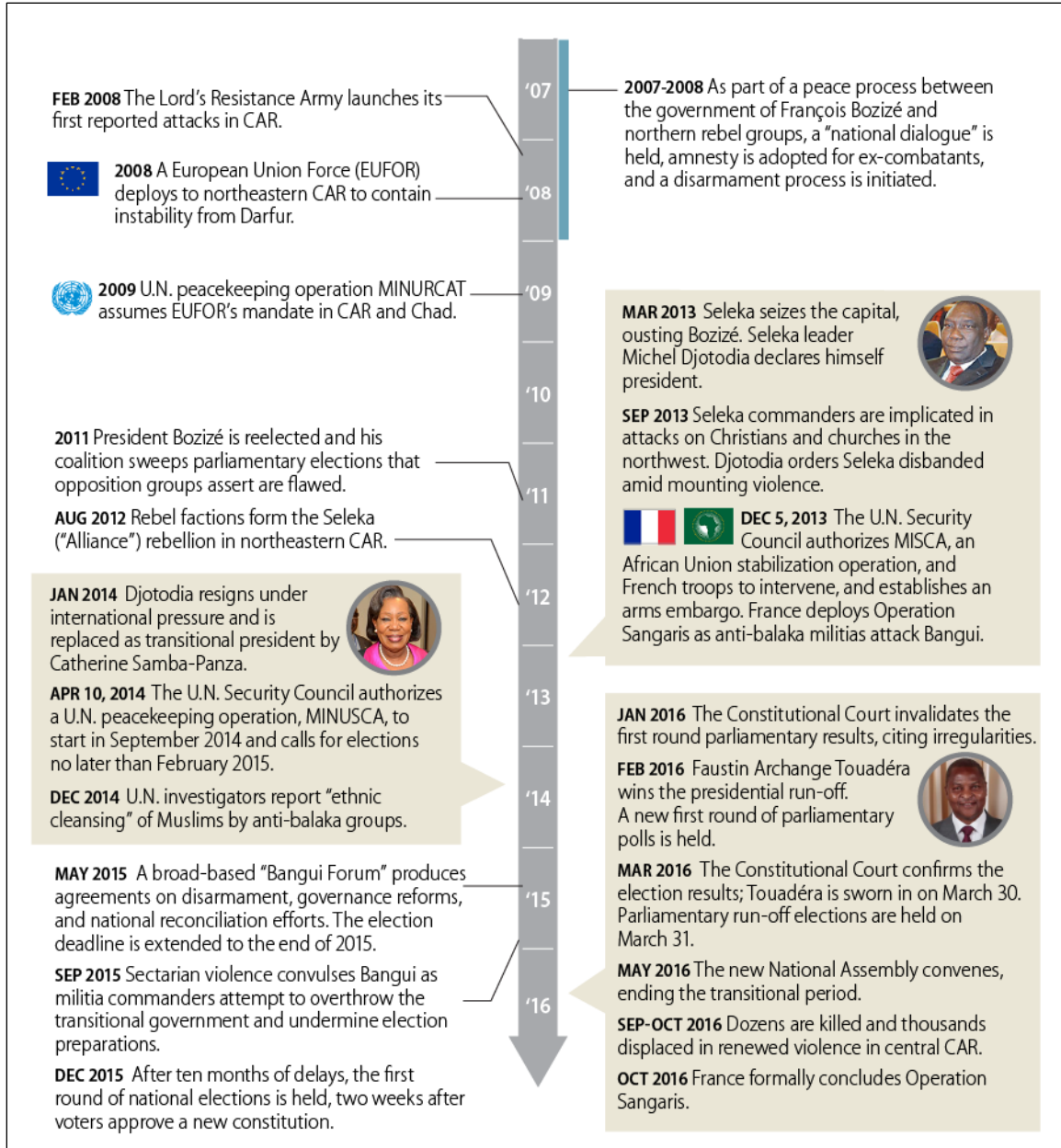
⁷ Human Rights Watch (HRW), "*I Can Still Smell the Dead*": *The Forgotten Human Rights Crisis in the Central African Republic*, September 18, 2013.

⁸ *Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in the Central African Republic*, April 1, 2015, U.N. doc S/2015/227; Amnesty International, *Erased Identity: Muslims in Ethnically-Cleansed Areas of the Central African Republic*, July 2015.

⁹ On the debate regarding assisted evacuations, see Peter Bouckaert (HRW), "The Central African Republic Has Become a Nightmare for Muslims," *Washington Post*, March 16, 2014.

¹⁰ *Final Report of the International Commission of Inquiry on the Central African Republic*, December 22, 2014, U.N. doc. S/2014/928.

Figure 2. Timeline of Events in CAR from 2008 to 2016



Source: CRS graphic, drawn from news reports, U.N. documents, and other sources.

The pace of overtly sectarian killings has slowed since 2014, but flare-ups continue to occur. In some cases, violence appears to have been the product of spontaneous events, while in others it appears to have been orchestrated by militia leaders with political ties (e.g., anti-balaka leaders with ties to Bozizé, sometimes with support from elements of the military). In September 2015, a wave of violence set off by the murder of a Muslim man in Bangui reportedly served as cover for an attempted overthrow of the transitional government by an “alliance of convenience” among ex-Seleka and anti-balaka hardliners.¹¹ Members of the national military (FACA)—characterized

¹¹ U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Two Central African Republic Militia Commanders,” (continued...)

in a subsequent U.N. investigation as “dominated by Christians and... generally distrusted by Muslims”—reportedly participated in the abuses.¹² Clashes among ex-Seleka factions have also increased since 2014, pointing to divergent interests, ethnic identities, and constituencies represented within the movement. Recent sectarian and militia violence has been concentrated in Bangui and in interior areas located at the seams of ex-Seleka and anti-balaka control.

More broadly, cycles of violence in CAR are rooted in patterns in which successive governments have coopted rebel leaders by offering them government posts—thereby providing an incentive for rebellion, weakening civilian-led political movements, and contributing to a perception of impunity. Some analysts assert that these practices are, more broadly, linked to systems of patronage and nepotism that have allowed leaders to exercise “extended personal rule” over a vast, diverse, and sparsely populated country.¹³ Some posit that the recent conflict also reflects a tradition of armed resistance among CAR’s rural communities.¹⁴ Overall, the dynamics of violence have rendered it difficult to distinguish between combatant and civilian, and between the stated and “genuine” motivations of armed group leaders.

Observers warn that the recent conflict has calcified ethno-religious identities in CAR, further entrenching the societal cleavages that contributed to the emergence of the crisis. According to the International Crisis Group, the conflict has led to the rise of “armed communities divided along religious lines,” and has “reopened the dangerous question about who has the right to live in CAR.”¹⁵ Anti-Muslim sentiment appears to remain widespread among Christians, as does the notion that Muslims are foreign invaders.¹⁶ In 2016, U.N. sanctions monitors have documented “acts of aggression targeting Muslim internally displaced persons and refugees returning to their homes,” while a MINUSCA investigation reported that CAR’s “complex ethno-political conflict... can increasingly be seen as sectarian or religious in nature.”¹⁷

A New Government: Prospects and Challenges

President Touadéra assumed office in March 2016, having won over 60% of the vote in a February 2016 run-off against Anicet-Georges Dologuélé, following general elections in December 2015. African Union (AU) observers found both polls to be transparent and reported registered voter turnout of 78% and 63% in the first and second rounds, respectively.¹⁸ (There

(...continued)

December 18, 2015. The violence reportedly led to dozens of fatalities and over 23,000 newly displaced persons (UNOCHA, “Situation in Bangui Following Violence Since 26 Sep 2015,” October 10, 2015).

¹² MINUSCA, *Violations and Abuses of International Human Rights and Humanitarian Law Committed in Bangui, Central African Republic, between 26 September and 20 October 2015*, published February 2016.

¹³ The Enough Project, *The Bangui Carousel: How the recycling of political elites reinforces instability and violence in the Central African Republic*, August 2016.

¹⁴ See, e.g., ICG, *Central African Republic: The Roots of Violence*, September 21, 2015.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ *Midterm report of the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic extended pursuant to Security Council resolution 2262 (2016)*, August 11, 2016; MINUSCA Human Rights Division, *Special Report on Kaga-Bandoro Incidents, 12 to 17 October 2016*, October 31, 2016.

¹⁸ AU Election Observation Mission, *Preliminary Statement on the 30th December 2015 Presidential and Legislative Elections in the Central African Republic* (January 2, 2016) and *Preliminary Declaration on the Second Round of Presidential and First Round of Legislative Elections of 14th February 2016 in Central African Republic* (February 16, 2016).

were no Western-funded independent national election observation missions.) Donors praised the election as a relatively open and peaceful contest.

Touadéra previously served as Prime Minister under former President Bozizé, and before that was a math professor. He cultivated a low profile during the transitional period, ran as an independent, and was not generally seen as a front-runner for the presidency.¹⁹ Some observers have attributed Touadéra's victory to his relative obscurity, which may have allowed him to avoid concerted opposition.²⁰ As the first president to come to office in a democratic transfer of power since 1993, Touadéra is well positioned to leverage international and domestic goodwill. Donors and CAR residents furthermore heralded the transition from the interim presidency of Catherine Samba-Panza, whose administration, despite initial optimism, had come to be characterized by a lack of initiative and by persistent allegations of corruption and nepotism.²¹ While Touadéra has garnered praise for his quiet personal style and broad political coalition, however, his administration may well fall subject to similar pathologies and challenges ahead.²²

The contest between Touadéra and Dologuélé (another former Prime Minister under Bozizé) involved a competition over supporters of the former president—who is designated for multilateral sanctions and was barred from running for reelection by CAR's Constitutional Court. Dologuélé was endorsed both by Bozizé's formerly ruling Kwa na Kwa party and by the self-styled national coordinator of the anti-balaka militias, but these groups' membership may have split between the two candidates.²³ Dologuélé decried "massive fraud" in the run-off, but ultimately conceded the election "for the sake of peace."²⁴ He was, at the same time, elected to parliament, where he leads the opposition bloc.

Touadéra's close ties to former President Bozizé have raised concerns.²⁵ He has appointed several Bozizé allies to his cabinet, possibly due to a desire to maintain support from individuals who continue to wield substantial political clout.²⁶ Some observers warn that perceived underrepresentation of Muslims in Touadéra's government could stoke tensions: there is only one Muslim in a prominent office, that of Speaker of Parliament, and only three, heading relatively low-power posts, in Touadéra's 23-member cabinet. According to U.N. sanctions monitors, this "represents a missed opportunity to send a strong signal of inclusion and reconciliation."²⁷

Observers have identified disarmament, national reconciliation, military reform, and job creation as key issues on which Touadéra will need to make visible progress in order to retain popular legitimacy and momentum.²⁸ He arguably must also address CAR's legacy of poor governance, impunity, and corruption, which many see as the root causes of the country's instability. To date,

¹⁹ See, e.g., *Jeune Afrique*, "Centrafrique: Acteurs et enjeux d'un scrutin majeur," December 29, 2015, which identified as front-runners Dologuélé, longtime opposition leader Martin Ziguélé, and ex-cabinet minister Karim Meckassoua.

²⁰ See, e.g., *Africa Confidential*, "Democracy sans frontières," January 22, 2016.

²¹ *New York Times*, "In Troubled States, New Governments with the Same Old Problems," April 1, 2014; *Africa Confidential*, "Allies Lose Faith," August 29, 2014.

²² *Jeune Afrique*, "Centrafrique : cinq choses à savoir sur Faustin-Archange Touadéra," February 22, 2016.

²³ Bloomberg, "Central African Republic Militia Backs Ex-Premier in Vote," December 23, 2015.

²⁴ *Africa Review*, "Defeated CAR candidate concedes poll results despite 'massive fraud,'" February 22, 2016.

²⁵ Reuters, "Central Africans Head to the Polls Under a Shadow from the Past," February 11, 2016; Celeste Hicks, "Familiar Problems Confront Central African Republic's New President," *World Politics Review*, February 25, 2016.

²⁶ ICG/Thibaud Leseur, "Central African Republic: Four Priorities for the New President," February 12, 2016.

²⁷ *Midterm report of the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic*, op. cit.

²⁸ For a summary of key challenges facing Touadéra's government, see ICG/Thibaud Leseur, "Central African Republic: Four Priorities for the New President," op. cit.

the president's approach to such policy challenges remains uncertain, despite ongoing talks with armed group leaders. A so-called Bangui Forum, held in May 2015 with the participation of a wide range of civic actors and some (but not all) militia commanders, produced notional frameworks on disarmament, reforms, and reconciliation—but the status of these commitments is now uncertain. The means and timeline for their implementation were uncertain from the start.

Spoilers remain a potent threat. The national government remains largely confined to the capital, while ex-Seleka and anti-balaka factions remain active across swathes of the country. Despite shared ties to Bozizé, powerful anti-balaka leaders in Bangui have criticized Touadéra's leadership since his inauguration, and are increasingly involved in fomenting violent anti-U.N. sentiment.²⁹ Meanwhile, some ex-Seleka leaders have engaged in an apparent effort to reconstitute the movement in the northeast. Some armed factions have rejected negotiations entirely. A fractious parliament, comprising representatives from 17 parties in addition to 57 independent delegates, may further impede momentum and complicate decision-making.³⁰ Given the scale of challenges, experts question whether the new government will have the political will and capacity to achieve meaningful progress on stabilization.

A constitutional referendum held in December 2015 was marred by violence, although the draft constitution was, in the end, backed by a majority of voters and thus adopted. The text of the new constitution appears designed to increase checks on presidential power (including via the creation of a new upper legislative chamber, the Senate), introduce firmer wording on presidential term limits, and improve legislative oversight of natural resource extraction deals signed by the government. It also prohibits from public service anyone found to have been complicit in a coup d'État, rebellion, or mutiny.³¹

MINUSCA: Current Issues

The U.N Security Council authorized the U.N. Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in CAR (MINUSCA) in 2014. It replaced and largely absorbed an existing African Union (AU) stabilization force, along with a preexisting U.N. political mission. U.N. Security Council Resolution 2212 (2015) increased MINUSCA's troop ceiling from 11,820 total uniformed personnel to 12,870, including 10,750 military personnel and 2,080 police. Resolution 2301 (2016) subsequently extended the operation's mandate through November 2017.

Since its inception, MINUSCA's effectiveness and conduct have been in question. Although it reached over 95% of its authorized military strength and 84% of its authorized police strength as of August 2016,³² the mission's ability to deploy effectively in remote areas has been hindered by logistical hurdles (including a lack of national transportation infrastructure and CAR's long rainy season) as well as troop contributor equipment and capacity shortfalls. According to a 2016 U.N. strategic review, air transport to eastern and northern zones is further constrained by "strong winds and high levels of dust, as well as the scarcity of properly refurbished airstrips, [which] make the majority of airports not fully functional after sunset."³³

²⁹ Reuters, "Four Killed in Anti-U.N. Unrest in Central African Republic: U.N." October 24, 2016.

³⁰ Economist Intelligence Unit, *Country Report: Central African Republic*, 3rd Quarter 2016.

³¹ Text published after endorsement by the National Transitional Council (CNT), August 31, 2016.

³² UN.org, "UN Missions Summary of Military and Police," as of August 31, 2016.

³³ U.N. Security Council, *Special Report of the Secretary-General on the strategic review of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic*, June 22, 2016, U.N. doc. S/2016/565.

Under its mandate to protect civilians, MINUSCA has declared “weapons-free zones” in key conflict-affected areas, including Bambari and Kaga-Bandoro, two heavily contested towns in central CAR. The implementation of such initiatives remains in question, as anecdotal evidence suggests that armed actors continue to enter such zones unobstructed.³⁴ Underscoring the challenge of disarmament in CAR, the killing of a Muslim man in Kaga-Bandoro in October 2016 triggered a wave of violence by ex-Seleka, anti-balaka, and armed civilians in the town that claimed nearly 40 lives and displaced thousands.³⁵

Force protection has been a challenge: the U.N. reports that twelve MINUSCA peacekeepers have been killed in “malicious acts” since operations began.³⁶ An internal review by MINUSCA in October 2016 noted “rising discontent” with the mission.³⁷ Continued violence has fueled local frustrations with MINUSCA’s perceived ineffectiveness, but public hostility may also be driven by “demagogic” rhetoric by some actors who seek to discredit international forces and destabilize the government for their own purposes.³⁸ In late October 2016, anti-U.N. protests in Bangui turned violent, leading to clashes between peacekeepers and armed demonstrators in which four civilians were reportedly killed and fourteen people injured, including five peacekeepers.³⁹

Allegations of Sexual Abuse and Exploitation by Foreign Troops

French, AU, and U.N. troops have been accused of sexual abuse and exploitation in CAR, in many cases involving children. U.N. statistics indicate that there have been 63 allegations against MINUSCA personnel (nearly all of them military troops) since the mission’s inception, of which 41 have been made in 2016 to date.⁴⁰ Since 2015, MINUSCA has had the highest number of such allegations per year of any U.N. peacekeeping operation. A spate of new claims that were leaked in March 2016 reportedly implicate French forces and MINUSCA peacekeepers in 108 potential additional cases of sexual abuse.⁴¹ An internal U.N. memo leaked to the press in October 2016, however, reportedly suggested that some allegations may have been fabricated by individuals seeking financial compensation.⁴² The reportedly high number of abuses by MINUSCA personnel has been attributed to the decision to “re-hat” African Union troops as U.N. personnel without sufficient training or, perhaps, vetting—in addition to other factors related to the harsh and violent context in which MINUSCA troops serve in the field.⁴³

Recent questions about the veracity of some allegations notwithstanding, the U.N. has been widely criticized for what has been described as an insufficient response to allegations concerning MINUSCA personnel, and for its handling of allegations concerning other foreign troops in CAR. Notably, it emerged in mid-2015 that evidence of abuses by French forces in CAR had been ignored by U.N. officials for months, despite a mandate to report on human rights abuses. In

³⁴ Stimson Center briefing note, *Shifting the Political Strategy of the UN Peacekeeping Mission*, op. cit.

³⁵ MINUSCA, *Special Report on Kaga-Bandoro Incidents, 12 to 17 October 2016*, October 31, 2016.

³⁶ U.N. Peacekeeping, *Fatalities by mission and incident type*, data as of October 31, 2016.

³⁷ MINUSCA, *Special Report on Kaga-Bandoro Incidents, 12 to 17 October 2016*, op. cit.

³⁸ ICG, “Central African Republic: Preventing a New Attempt at Destabilisation,” November 16, 2016.

³⁹ Reuters, “Four killed in anti-U.N. unrest in Central African Republic: U.N.,” October 24, 2016.

⁴⁰ U.N. Conduct and Discipline Unit, *Allegations by Category of Personnel Per Mission (Sexual Exploitation and Abuse)*, database available at <https://cdu.unlb.org/>, consulted October 2016.

⁴¹ *Code Blue*, “Shocking new reports of peacekeeper sexual abuse in the Central African Republic,” March 30, 2016.

⁴² Reuters, “Exclusive: U.N. Memo Casts Doubt on Some Central African Sex Abuse Accusations,” October 11, 2016.

⁴³ *Special Measures for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse: Report of the Secretary-General*, February 16, 2016, U.N. doc. A/70/729.

December 2015, an independent review accused U.N. agencies and MINUSCA of being aware of the allegations but failing to follow up on them appropriately—amounting to “a gross institutional failure.”⁴⁴ U.N. agencies were also accused of retaliating internally against a career U.N. human rights official based in Geneva who, in 2014, directly informed French authorities of previously unreleased reports of abuses by French troops.⁴⁵

In response to these scandals, U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon fired the head of MINUSCA, Senegalese Army General Babacar Gaye, in August 2015. His successor, Parfait Onanga-Anyanga, a Gabonese civilian and longtime U.N. official, has vowed to address abuses, including by providing communities with resources to report misbehavior, bolstering investigative officers, and providing protection for whistleblowers.⁴⁶ At a U.N. system-wide level, the Secretary General has also announced increased measures to promote transparent reporting on allegations of abuse, to expand prevention efforts, and to strengthen accountability for troops implicated in abuses.⁴⁷

The Economy

CAR is one of the world’s least developed countries. Agriculture, forestry, and mining are the most important economic sectors, but all are in disarray. Population displacements have severely disrupted the farming cycle and other livelihoods, leading to “crisis”-level food insecurity throughout the country.⁴⁸ The exodus of persecuted Muslim communities, who previously dominated trade networks in much of the country, may have contributed to economic collapse.

Illicit economic networks have flourished in many areas, leading some to describe CAR as a “warlord” economy. According to a 2015 report by the Enough Project, armed groups in CAR profit “from forceful taxation and illicit trade with gold and diamonds that are smuggled across international borders or sold to Central African diamond companies. Moreover, armed groups use violence, attacks, and threats to collect revenue from civilians, businesses, and public institutions and to conduct widespread looting.”⁴⁹ Poaching of elephant ivory is another reportedly lucrative source of revenue for armed groups, including the LRA. Seleka fighters reportedly participated in several large elephant killings in 2013, and while in control of Bangui, Seleka forces reportedly looted the Ministry of Water and Forests for weapons and previously confiscated ivory tusks.⁵⁰

CAR produces diamonds, but in 2013 it was suspended from exporting them under the Kimberley Process—an international certification-based rough diamond regulation initiative aimed at preventing “conflict diamonds” from entering legitimate international trade. Armed groups reportedly control mining sites in central CAR, and U.N. sanctions monitors reported that over

⁴⁴ U.N. General Assembly, *Report of an Independent review on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by International Peacekeeping Forces in the Central African Republic*, December 17, 2015, U.N. doc. A/71/99.

⁴⁵ *Code Blue*, “The UN’s Dirty Secret: The untold story of Anders Kompass and Peacekeepers Sex Abuse in the Central African Republic,” May 29, 2015.

⁴⁶ Clar Ni Chonghaile, “Head of UN mission in Central African Republic pledges to end troop abuses,” *The Guardian*, May 26, 2016.

⁴⁷ *Special Measures for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse*, U.N. doc. A/70/729, op. cit.

⁴⁸ U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), *Central African Republic – Complex Emergency Fact Sheet #6, Fiscal Year 2016*, September 30, 2016.

⁴⁹ Enough Project, *Warlord Business: CAR’s Violent Armed Groups and their Criminal Operations for Profit and Power*, June 2015.

⁵⁰ Enough Project, *Behind the Headlines: Drivers of Violence in the Central African Republic*, May 2014; *Report of the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2127 (2013)*, July 1, 2014, U.N. doc. S/2014/452.

\$24 million worth of diamonds were smuggled out of the country between May 2013 and October 2014.⁵¹ In July 2015, citing “progress made to date” by CAR, the Kimberley Process established a framework for the resumption of rough diamond exports from certain designated “compliant zones” deemed free from the control of non-state armed groups.⁵² In March 2016, Kimberley Process monitors certified Berbérati, a sub-prefecture of southwestern Mambéré-Kadéï prefecture (**Figure 1**), as compliant, and exports from that area resumed in June.⁵³ Three more sub-prefectures—Carnot (Mambéré-Kadéï), Boda (Lobaye), and Nola (Sangha-Mbaéré)—were declared compliant in September 2016; efforts to certify additional zones, particularly in the country’s southwest, are underway.⁵⁴ However, observers have cautioned against premature certification of mining zones in areas where anti-balaka groups remain active, and an August 2016 U.N. Panel of Experts report documented ongoing violence and restrictions on freedom of movement, particularly of Muslims, in Berbérati and Carnot, among other areas.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) approved a three-year, \$115.8 million financial assistance package in 2016 that “aims to entrench macroeconomic stability and create the conditions for sustained and inclusive growth.”⁵⁵ An early assessment of the program, which is designed to build on previous IMF assistance disbursed under the 2014-2015 interim government, concluded that structural reforms focused on revenue generation were “broadly on track.”⁵⁶ At the same time, in November 2016, the IMF lowered its GDP growth projections for CAR to 4.5% and 5.0% in 2016 and 2017, respectively, down from July 2016 forecasts of 5.2% and 5.5%. The IMF also noted rising prices for staple goods, and raised its projection of average annual inflation to 5.1%, from 4.0% previously. The IMF staff team attributed the revised estimates to deteriorating security conditions.

The World Bank has committed nearly \$100 million in grants and concessional loans since 2013 to help restore key government services in CAR. In the meantime, humanitarian organizations remain the country’s primary providers of basic services.

Lord’s Resistance Army Presence⁵⁷

Separate in origin from the 2013-2015 conflict, the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), a small militia of Ugandan origin founded and led by Joseph Kony, has operated in CAR’s southeast since at least 2008.⁵⁸ Since 2014, the group has expanded its area of influence into northeastern Haute-Kotto prefecture, though U.N. sanctions monitors report that the group’s primary areas of

⁵¹ *Final report of the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2127 (2013)*, October 29, 2014, U.N. doc. S/2014/762.

⁵² Kimberley Process, *Operational Framework for Resumption of Exports of Rough Diamonds from the Central African Republic*, July 2015.

⁵³ *Midterm report of the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic*, op. cit.

⁵⁴ Albert Robinson, “Kimberley Process Declares Three More Areas in CAR as ‘Compliant Zones,’” *IDEX*, September 27, 2016.

⁵⁵ IMF, “IMF Executive Board Approves Three-Year US\$115.8 Million Arrangement under the ECF for the Central African Republic,” July 21, 2016.

⁵⁶ IMF, “IMF Staff Team Concludes Visit to the Central African Republic,” September 13, 2016.

⁵⁷ See CRS Report R42094, *The Lord’s Resistance Army: The U.S. Response*, by Alexis Arieff, Lauren Ploch Blanchard, and Tomas F. Husted.

⁵⁸ The cult-like LRA emerged in northern Uganda in the late 1980s, in the context of long-standing grievances against perceived southern political dominance and economic neglect. The LRA does not have a clear political agenda and its operations now appear to be motivated by little other than the infliction of violence and the protection of group leaders.

operation remain along CAR's southeastern border with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).⁵⁹ LRA attacks on rural communities have displaced hundreds of thousands of people in CAR, DRC, and South Sudan since 2008. CAR appears to have attracted LRA commanders due to its remoteness, lack of an effective military, and location near territory previously familiar to the group.⁶⁰ Further, according to non-government reports, the LRA exploits CAR's porous southern and eastern borders to smuggle ivory poached from DRC to Kafia Kingi, a Sudanese enclave where the LRA has reportedly established a presence, for trafficking onward to Asia.⁶¹

The Ugandan military has conducted counter-LRA operations in CAR since 2009. The United States has provided significant support, including logistical and intelligence assistance to Ugandan troops and the deployment of U.S. military advisors to the field since late 2011.⁶² The Ugandan-led operations have been re-hatted as an AU Regional Task Force (AU-RTF) since 2012. The United States has also provided funding for assistance to communities in LRA-affected areas, including humanitarian aid, early warning efforts, and reconciliation programs. In 2016, Uganda began pulling back from its forward operating bases in CAR and announced its intentions to fully withdraw its troops from CAR by early 2017 at the latest.⁶³ The implications for the U.S. military advisory mission, Defense Department-funded logistical support, and civilian LRA-related foreign aid programs remain to be seen.

LRA fighters appear to have taken advantage of instability in CAR to evade regional military operations. They have also reportedly leveraged opportunistic relationships with ex-Seleka fighters to expand their involvement in illicit trafficking of gold and diamonds from CAR, though such relationships appear to reflect individual agreements, not broader ties between the groups.⁶⁴

In January 2015, Dominic Ongwen, a top LRA commander, surrendered to U.S. forces in CAR—reportedly after making contact with ex-Seleka combatants. He was then delivered to the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague, where he faces seven counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity. In April 2015, remains exhumed from a grave in CAR were confirmed to be those of another top LRA commander, Okot Odhiambo. These developments appeared to confirm a gradual weakening of the group's leadership structure in recent years: of five top LRA commanders sought by the ICC since 2005, only Kony remains at large.⁶⁵ Recent estimates put the LRA's total strength at fewer than 200 fighters.⁶⁶ Advocates of a continued U.S. role in countering the LRA nevertheless warn that the group remains a threat and could rebound.⁶⁷

⁵⁹ *Midterm report of the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic*, op. cit.

⁶⁰ Enough Project, *On the Heels of Kony: The Untold Tragedy Unfolding in the Central African Republic*, June 2010.

⁶¹ The Resolve, *The Kony Crossroads*, August 2015.

⁶² Defense Department-funded logistical support for Ugandan-led operations is authorized through FY2017 under P.L. 113-66. P.L. 113-235 and prior appropriations measures provided funds for U.S. intelligence support.

⁶³ Nicholas Bariyo, "Uganda to Withdraw Troops From African Force Hunting Lord's Resistance Army," *Wall Street Journal*, June 13, 2016; Risdell Kasasira, "UPDF pull out of Kony hunt," *Daily Monitor*, August 14, 2016.

⁶⁴ The Resolve, *The Kony Crossroads*, op. cit.

⁶⁵ LRA Army Commander Raska Lukwiya and Vice Chairman Vincent Otti were killed in 2006 and 2007, respectively.

⁶⁶ On March 8, 2016, General David Rodriguez, then-Commander of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), testified to the Senate Armed Services Committee that "we estimate less than 200 Lord's Resistance Army fighters remain."

⁶⁷ Ledio Cakaj & Ronald Atkinson, "The Lord's Resistance Army: Still a Threat," *The Cipher Brief*, October 30, 2016.

U.S. Policy and Aid

U.S. engagement in CAR has historically been limited. The U.S. diplomatic presence prior to the recent conflict consisted of a tiny embassy staff, with no full-time U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) presence.⁶⁸ A small number of U.S. military advisors had deployed to CAR starting in 2011 in support of Ugandan-led counter-LRA operations (discussed above). In December 2012, U.S. diplomatic personnel were evacuated from Bangui as the Seleka rebel movement advanced toward the capital. The U.S. government resumed limited diplomatic operations in Bangui in mid-2014, headed by a Chargé d'Affaires, along with a Washington D.C.-based Special Representative for CAR. In October 2015, a new U.S. Ambassador, Jeffrey Hawkins, took up his position in Bangui, marking a return to full embassy operations.

As the crisis erupted in 2013, the Obama Administration significantly scaled up U.S. aid and diplomatic efforts to stem the surge of violence. The President issued Executive Order 13667 (2014) authorizing targeted sanctions against actors fueling the conflict; the State Department and Defense Department provided substantial support to African peacekeepers and French troops deploying to CAR; the President and other Administration officials engaged in public diplomacy outreach to the people of CAR; the State Department and USAID identified new funding for conflict mitigation, reconciliation, justice, and governance programs; and in the U.N. Security Council, the Administration supported the establishment of MINUSCA.⁶⁹ Top officials portrayed these actions as part of a broader Administration effort to elevate the prevention of “mass atrocities” as a core tenet of U.S. foreign policy—and as the product of a related interagency process known as the Atrocities Prevention Board.⁷⁰ Visiting Bangui in 2014, U.S. Permanent Representative to the U.N. Samantha Power stated that, “the Rwandan genocide taught us the price of delay in responding to mass violence... We must do more; and we must do it now.”⁷¹

The Administration has imposed targeted financial and travel sanctions on 13 individuals (one of whom was subsequently removed from the list after his death), two private companies, and one armed group as a whole for contributing to the conflict in CAR. Those sanctioned include former presidents François Bozizé and Michel Djotodia (the Seleka leader who seized power in 2013); militia leaders affiliated with both the Seleka movement and anti-balaka groups; the Lord's Resistance Army (as a group) along with LRA founder Joseph Kony and two of his sons⁷²; and

⁶⁸ The U.S. Embassy has been temporarily shuttered several times due to turmoil in Bangui, including in 1996-1997 due to a military mutiny, and in 2002 due to the launch of Bozizé's rebellion.

⁶⁹ In FY2014-FY2015, the State Department allocated at least \$85 million in voluntary funding under the Peacekeeping Operations (PKO) account to support training, equipment, and sustainment for African troops deploying to CAR under AU and, subsequently, MINUSCA (State Department, Africa Bureau, response to CRS query, December 2014; and State Department *Congressional Budget Justification(s)*, FY2015-FY2017). Separately, President Obama invoked his authority under section 506(a)(1) of the Foreign Assistance Act to provide up to \$60 million in Defense Department equipment and services to support French and AU troops (White House, Presidential Memorandum – Central African Republic Drawdown,” December 10, 2013). According to Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Sarah Sewall, additional atrocity-prevention-related aid identified for CAR as of mid-2015 totaled at least \$30 million (Under Secretary Sewall, “Making Progress: U.S. Prevention of Mass Atrocities,” Remarks at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, April 24, 2015).

⁷⁰ Remarks by Sarah Sewall at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, op. cit. On the Obama Administration's atrocity-prevention initiatives, see <http://www.humanrights.gov/dyn/issues/atrocity-prevention.html>.

⁷¹ Ambassador Samantha Power, “Remarks to Troops of the African-Led International Support Mission in the Central African Republic,” April 9, 2014.

⁷² The LRA was already subject to the U.S. Terrorist Exclusion List (a travel ban) since 2001 and Kony was designated in 2008 for targeted sanctions under Executive Order 13224, related to terrorism. The CAR-related designations expand the restrictions on the LRA, the grounds for designating Kony, and the number of designees (to include Kony's sons).

two Belgium-based diamond companies. Not all U.S. designees are on the U.N. sanctions list; for example, the U.N. sanctions committee on CAR has not designated Djotodia to date. Few, if any, designees are known to maintain assets in the United States or to have traveled to the United States. Several on the U.N. list, however, appear to travel relatively freely within the region, despite U.N. member states' purported obligations to implement a multilateral travel ban.

The United States has been the leading bilateral humanitarian donor to CAR since 2013, providing over \$404 million to help address needs both within CAR and among CAR refugees and host communities in neighboring countries.⁷³ The United States is also the top financial contributor to MINUSCA's budget (as with all U.N. peacekeeping operations), under the system of assessed contributions for U.N. peacekeeping. U.S. funding for MINUSCA is provided through the State Department's Contributions to International Peacekeeping Activities (CIPA) account. As of early 2016, the anticipated U.S. allocation for MINUSCA from FY2016 funds totaled \$286.7 million, and the Obama Administration requested \$285 million for FY2017.⁷⁴

For FY2017, the State Department also requested \$18.1 million in bilateral aid for CAR: \$8 million in Peacekeeping Operations (PKO) funds for continuing voluntary support to African troop contributors to MINUSCA and for bilateral support to security sector reform; \$5.7 million in International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) funds to continue efforts to establish a functioning criminal justice system; \$4.3 million in Economic Support Fund (ESF) for peacebuilding programs; and \$150,000 in International Military Education and Training (IMET) for military professionalization and to promote bilateral military ties.⁷⁵ At a major donors' conference for CAR held in Brussels in November 2016, the Administration pledged \$11.7 million in U.S. funding to support the justice sector, law enforcement, and economic livelihoods, referring to already budgeted funds.⁷⁶ Total donor pledges reached \$2.2 billion.

The above bilateral aid figures do not include emergency humanitarian aid, which is allocated during the year according to need. The CAR aid figures reported in the State Department's annual *Congressional Budget Justification* also do not include substantial funding that has been allocated through regionally- and centrally-managed programs, including for conflict-mitigation, security sector reform, and other special initiatives. USAID and the State Department allocated roughly \$27 million for development and peacebuilding programs in CAR between FY2013 and FY2016, much of which was not originally budgeted specifically for CAR.⁷⁷ Due to such allocations, the State Department-administered INCLE account has become a top source of U.S. aid funding for CAR since 2014, with at least \$25 million notified to Congress in FY2015 alone (constituted from reprogrammed funds), to help build, train, and equip CAR's police and judicial sector.⁷⁸

Legal restrictions on certain aid to the government of CAR under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, due to CAR's poor ranking in the State Department's *Trafficking in Persons* report, were waived by President Obama, who asserted that the provision of otherwise-

⁷³ USAID, *Central African Republic – Complex Emergency*, Fact Sheet #2, FY2013, September 30, 2013; Fact Sheet #21, FY2014, September 30, 2014; Fact Sheet #19, FY2015, September 30, 2015; and Fact Sheet #6, FY2016, September 30, 2016. For FY2016, in which the U.S. government provided \$99 million in humanitarian aid for CAR, the next-highest bilateral donor was the United Kingdom, with 30 million, followed by the European Commission, with \$21 million. International figures were drawn by USAID from UNOCHA's Financial Tracking Service.

⁷⁴ State Department, FY2017 *Congressional Budget Justification*, *Department of State Operations*.

⁷⁵ State Department, FY2017 *Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations*.

⁷⁶ State Department, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM, which led the U.S. delegation to the conference), response to CRS query, November 2016.

⁷⁷ USAID response to CRS query, November 2016, and State Department FY2016 653(a) estimates as of mid-2016.

⁷⁸ CRS analysis of State Department congressional notifications.

restricted programs “would promote the purposes of the Act or is otherwise in the national interest of the United States.”⁷⁹

Recent Legislation

The 114th Congress helped shape U.S. engagement with CAR through several legislative provisions, primarily enacted through foreign aid appropriations measures. In particular, Congress provided unspecified levels of funding for reconciliation and peacebuilding programs in CAR (most recently, §7042[a], Division K of P.L. 114-113, the FY2016 Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act) and for programs to assist civilians in areas affected by the LRA (§7042[f]). Similar provisions were included in the House version of the FY2017 foreign aid appropriations bill (H.R. 5912), and in report language accompanying the Senate version of the same (S.Rept. 114-290, accompanying S. 3117). Other relevant legislation enacted in the 114th Congress included the Eliminate, Neutralize, and Disrupt Wildlife Trafficking Act of 2016 (P.L. 114-231).

The House Report accompanying H.R. 5485 (Financial Services and General Government Appropriations Bill, 2017; H.Rept. 114-624) recommends “the use of funds to enhance regional expertise and capacity for sanctions investigations, policy development, and enforcement of sanctions” in Africa, including, specifically, CAR. Resolutions introduced in the 114th Congress with potential implications for CAR included H.Res. 310 and S.Res. 211 (regarding genocide and mass atrocities), S.Res. 237 and H.Res. 394 (on the Lord’s Resistance Army), and S.Res. 204 (on “World Refugee Day”). In the 113th Congress, S.Res. 375, concerning the crisis in CAR and international efforts to address it, passed the Senate.

In the 113th Congress, Senate appropriators expressed concern that violence between Christians and Muslims in CAR “could result in genocide” and required the Secretary of State to report “on an interagency strategy to help promote stability” in the country, including funding estimates (S.Rept. 113-195, accompanying S. 2499). The State Department submitted a strategy document in April 2015 that defined U.S. “national interests” in CAR as “first, to prevent mass atrocities and genocide,” and “second, to help CAR become a stable regional partner able to exercise effective governance throughout its territory, thereby preventing the use of CAR territory for international criminal or terrorist networks.”⁸⁰

Outlook and Issues for Congress

Some observers assert that U.S. response to the conflict in CAR helped avert a much larger crisis.⁸¹ The situation nonetheless remains extremely challenging, leading others to characterize it as an example of the limits of international commitments to protect civilians.⁸² Despite domestic political progress, international troop deployments, aid, and diplomatic engagement, residents of CAR continue to suffer armed attacks by militias. Few root causes of the conflict have been successfully addressed. Looking ahead, Congress may influence the funding levels, duration, and

⁷⁹ For FY2017, see The White House, “Presidential Determination -- Foreign Governments’ Efforts Regarding Trafficking in Persons,” September 27, 2016.

⁸⁰ State Department, *U.S. Strategy to Support Stability in the Central African Republic*, April 14, 2015.

⁸¹ See, e.g., Hayes Brown, “The Inside Story of How the U.S. Acted to Prevent Another Rwanda,” *ThinkProgress*, December 20, 2013.

⁸² Roland Paris, “Is it possible to meet the ‘Responsibility to Protect’?” *Washington Post*, Monkey Cage blog, December 9, 2014.

mechanisms of U.S. humanitarian assistance and U.S. support for stabilization efforts. Congress may also weigh the relative priority of the CAR crisis in the context of competing priorities elsewhere in Africa and beyond.

Some observers have examined MINUSCA's performance in the context of an ongoing debate regarding the relative merits of African Union versus U.N.-conducted stabilization missions. This debate has been at play in Mali, Somalia, and elsewhere. In short, neighboring states may have greater political commitment to resolving a crisis in their backyard, but regional operations are often hampered by a lack of capacity and handicapped by political rivalries and competing interests. On the other hand, U.N. peacekeeping operations, while more consistently funded and vetted, can be slow to fully deploy and, often, risk-averse to a point that can inhibit effectiveness. They, too, may rely on troop contributors that exhibit limited capacity and accountability.

In the long term, the internal political and security arrangements that could allow for stability and improved governance in CAR may prove elusive. International actors have repeatedly attempted military interventions, peace processes, state-building, and security sector reform efforts in CAR—with mixed results, at best. Despite agreements at the 2015 Bangui Forum and ongoing consultations with armed groups by the new government, the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of combatants, the investigation and prosecution of human rights abusers, and the creation of functional and representative state security forces in CAR have not significantly advanced. The conflict appears to have created new, harmful dynamics among communities at the grassroots level that may prove durable and difficult to contain.

The potential impact of the CAR crisis on regional stability is of concern to U.S. policymakers, particularly as conflicts and political crises in nearby countries, such as South Sudan, Burundi, and DRC, persist. To date, little violence has been reported among border communities in neighboring states, despite refugee flows from CAR and the fact that CAR's demographics are mirrored elsewhere in Central Africa. Still, CAR refugees have taxed scarce local resources, while insecurity has hindered cross-border trade and humanitarian aid delivery. Neighboring states have limited capacity to respond to these problems or to contain violence should it erupt.

Regional crises also have the potential to spill in to CAR or otherwise affect stabilization efforts there. For example, in January 2016, U.N. headquarters officials decided not to renew the Burundian police contingent in MINUSCA when its current tour of duty ends, citing police abuses within Burundi.⁸³ Further turmoil in Burundi, a top MINUSCA troop contributor, could lead the country to withdraw its military personnel as well (or the U.N. to reject them). Concerns about whether transnational violent extremist organizations could seek safe havens in CAR or radicalize local populations affected by the conflict are also likely to persist.

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⁸³ U.N. daily news briefing, June 3, 2016. For background, see CRS Report R44018, *Burundi's Political Crisis*, by Emily Renard and Alexis Arieff.