

## **How to Curb the Central African Republic's Downward Spiral? Rising Violence, Absent Government, and Cattle Theft**

**(C10 project) Research Brief 6 – August 2017**

The GIGA-IAA research project on security governance, carried out within the German Science Foundation's SFB700 programme, sets out to understand the relations between actors and institutions involved in maintaining security and stability in areas with limited state presence. The project thereby seeks to decipher actions and structures that contribute to or undermine stability and social cohesion. The project researches both South Sudan and the Central African Republic. This research brief presents the key findings of ten days of fieldwork in the Central African Republic's capital, Bangui, in August 2017. We, Dr Lotje de Vries (Wageningen University) and Tim Glawion (GIGA-Hamburg), spoke to a wide array of people in the capital, ranging from ministers to (former) rebel leaders and displaced cattle keepers. Our interviews probed the views of new state authorities, of international interveners, national journalists, and academics, as well as those displaced from the different hotspots of the country.

With violence sharply on the rise in the central and eastern parts of the country and 14 out of the 16 prefectures under the control of armed groups, none of the national or international actors seem to have ready solutions at hand. The recent warning of an ensuing "genocide" by UN Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Stephen O'Brien, however, misses the point. Violence is not centrally orchestrated against one seemingly clearly defined community. Instead, conflict is on the rise due to shifting alliances between armed groups, local spirals of revenge attacks, and a devastating reluctance of UN peacekeeping troops to intervene. In the context of rising violence, the biggest concern for the national government, elected in March 2016, is to end the arms embargo. Realistically speaking, government forces can at most play a supportive role to peacekeeping troops. At the same time uncontrolled rearmament of the national army could potentially trigger new conflict lines. It is thus crucial to understand the entirety of the new power balances within the institutions of the state, including the worrying struggles between and within government and parliament, and the linkages between political elites in the capital and the armed groups in the provinces. Despite efforts by the president and a few of his ministers, the overall weaknesses of the state – including the neglect of the provinces and abuse of office – seem to persist. Finally, the plight of the nomadic cattle keepers, the Peulh, should receive international attention – not only because of their very real suffering, but also because cattle have become a key revenue source and item of conflict.

### **No de-escalation strategies for spiralling violence**

The Mbomou prefecture with its capital Bangassou has been the most recent region to be drawn back into the conflict. Events here are indicative of similar trends in other old (Kaga Bandoro, Paoua, Bambari, Bria) and new (e.g. Zemio, Gambo, Alindao) areas of conflict. First, after being chased out of Bambari by MINUSCA, the UPC of Ali Darassa caused numerous deaths among the local population of Mbomou – and thereby raised local demands for protection or even reprisals. MINUSCA did not intervene forcefully to halt the UPC from expanding into numerous towns. Auto-defence groups claimed they thus needed to take security into their own hands, but were confronted by MINUSCA, who killed one of their leaders in Nzacko. Auto-defence groups accused MINUSCA of supporting the "Muslim" UPC (the Moroccan contingent is also seen as "Muslim") and attacked MINUSCA forces both on the road at Yongofongo and at their base in Bangassou. The deeper embedding of MINUSCA in local society with regular and widespread contact to the populace could have prevented the spread of such rumours. Instead,



MINUSCA is further withdrawing from the scene. They even failed to protect the Muslim population, despite the presence of a large contingent near Bangassou, when the local defence groups attacked the town's Muslim quarter in May 2017. This blatant reluctance to intervene in fulfilment of their mandate to protect civilians and restore state order contributes to the consolidation of armed groups. Having to fear no reprisals from MINUSCA, even when they cross alleged red lines, some armed groups have expanded their influence. Ordinary people increasingly mistrust MINUSCA for failing to protect them from such violent movements. Some thus join or support auto-defence groups that themselves commit xenophobic attacks against Muslim communities. Only a forceful intervention granting security guarantees to the populace and communicating these clearly can end this spiral. Unfortunately, we observed no signs at UN level of changing strategy.

### **The mayor of Bangui – limited governance of state actors**

With very little control over the territory, one respondent dubbed the president of the CAR “the mayor of Bangui”. Others found even that title to overestimate his influence: much of Bangui also remains contested or at best controlled by international forces, and not the state. There are some positive signs of change among the new members of the state institutions after last year's successful elections – for example, a president who actively speaks out for peace and promotes freedom of speech, and an education minister who is reforming the corrupt examination system. However, hope is overshadowed by the immense deficiencies and continuities of old corrupt practices. Government still hardly manages to stretch its capacities to the peripheries, lawmakers in parliament regroup mostly around leaders instead of political ideas, and a number of deputies hold links to armed groups. The training and rearmament of the FACA, which has become a popular topic for many stakeholders, belies the limited possibilities of state reassertion over the territory. In an ideal scenario, exemplary battalions could assist MINUSCA in embedded missions in medium- to low-level conflict areas. In the worst-case scenario, legacies of arbitrary violence by the old FACA forces, and of those to be integrated from armed groups through DDR, could make the FACA a problematic further faction in the conflict. Especially since state security forces in the past held vast prejudices against Muslim citizens, and nomadic Peulh in particular.

### **Fighting for cattle**

The Nomadic Peulh minority form an important factor in the conflict dynamic: their cows are subject to raids by armed groups, and are a source of racketeering by other rebels in return for protection. All armed groups benefit from stolen cattle as they charge a roughly 40-dollar transit fee per head of cow to pass their controlled territory. Their importance in the conflict economy has prompted certain Peulh leaders to label the cattle “blood cows”, in an analogy to “blood diamonds”. Ever since violence peaked in 2014, the majority of Central African Peulh have lived in exile in Cameroon and Chad. Respondents tend to conflate Peulh with the two armed groups that claim to protect them (the UPC in the central region and 3R in the north-west). Few national and international actors openly counter such dangerous rhetoric in fear of being considered partial, and further crumbling the already low levels of popular appreciation. As a result, however, the return and rehabilitation of the Peulh and their pastoral livelihoods as part of the Central African society remains low on the long list of priorities. It will, however, take courageous inclusionary policies towards Muslim and Peulh minorities combined with a firm stance against armed actors to break the spiral of increasing tensions between communities.