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Africa Meeting Summary

Conflict in the Central African Republic: Religion, Power and Prospects for Reconciliation

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INTRODUCTION

This document provides a summary of a meeting and Q&A session held at Chatham House on 27 January 2014 which focused on the on-going conflict in the Central African Republic and on religion, power and the prospects for reconciliation in the country.

Internece violence in the Central African Republic is escalating as a cycle of revenge attacks appears to be developing between Muslim and Christian rebels and vigilantes, with significant costs to civilians. There are growing fears that the crisis will become entrenched through religious conflict and the situation may spread across the region with confrontations between Christian and Muslim communities in neighbouring countries. Following the December 2013 French intervention, which helped to temporarily reduce violence, African and French troops are still deployed in the country. However, violence continues to threaten the lives and livelihoods of both Christian and Muslim communities in the CAR.

The meeting and the Q&A session were held on the record and the views expressed are those of the participants. The following summary is intended to serve as an *aide-mémoire* for those who took part and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

For more information, including recordings, transcripts, summaries, and further resources on this and other related topics visit www.chathamhouse.org/research/africa.

DIEUDONNÉ NZAPALAINGA

The speaker stated that the Central African Republic (CAR) is on fire; this is the reason for the delegation's visit to Europe. It is seeking to extinguish this fire. It is hoped that the CAR's friends in the UN and EU can contribute to this solution. Recent media reports have depicted events in the country as unbearable and barbaric. There are many people trying to survive in the bush without food and medicine, and they are in great danger. Around 50 per cent of the people of Bangui are now in camps. Mr Nzapalainga stated that the international presence in the CAR is welcome. The national army is not trained for what is currently taking place in the country.

An [article](#) written by Mr Nzapalainga and Mr Layama in the *Washington Post* called for a UN mission to be implemented in the CAR. The issue is very complex but the speakers are calling for disarmament of the Séléka fighters and the Christian militias. In such a vast territory, there is an urgent need for more soldiers. A mission featuring the blue helmets of the UN is needed. The state now only exists in name; everything has been pillaged and everything will have to be rebuilt.

The speaker stated that he was happy to see the results of the recent presidential election. The winner was accepted by all candidates; the losing finalist embraced her and asked the people of the CAR to support the winning candidate. This is a significant example of a fairly contested election. When the rules are clear and there is no corruption it is therefore possible to have fair and accepted elections. In order for progress to continue, the two opposing armed groups must be disarmed.

As religious leaders, the speakers had set themselves up to provide a platform for dialogue. The head of the Protestant Church, Nicolas Guérékoyamé-Gbangou, could not be present at today's meeting due to a recent family bereavement. This platform has been running since 15 December 2012. There is a need for all three religious groups – Catholic, Protestant and Muslim - to have a common space in which to share their problems. After the Séléka rebels took power, the platform continued to exist. People saw entire villages burned down and many people died or were displaced. As a result, there came a time when people began to say 'enough is enough'.

The speaker said the motivations of the groups involved are not religious. They are not fighting for any church or biblical doctrine. The anti-balaka

fighters wear charms in order to protect themselves; this is a clear sign of animist beliefs. It is essential to disarm these groups if reconciliation is to take place. The platform is appealing to all of the young people in the CAR in order to convey the truth of what is taking place and to imprint the message that all arms must be put down.

OMAR KABINE LAYAMA

The speaker said it was important to consider that a prominent aspect of the crisis is humanitarianism. The humanitarian situation is degrading and very worrying. He said it was important to stress that the crimes occurring are on a very large scale, and that they were of a kind that the CAR has never experienced. There were reports of pregnant women being knifed in their stomachs, fetuses trampled upon and numerous reports of cannibalism. It was like a return to the first century of mankind. A huge amount of work lies ahead for the CAR.

The speaker claimed that the platform created by the religious leaders of the CAR is designed to enable the next generation of the country's youth to break the cycle of violence. Although the delegation are ministers of the Word, there is also a strong need for action. There are plans for the creation of a school for peace, which will bring together children from the three main faiths in order to learn side by side.

The crisis has also resulted in the need for an inter-confessional hospital. Séléka fighters have killed patients in hospitals and the anti-balaka have retaliated by preventing people from seeking medical treatment. As a result, the delegation believes that there is an urgent need for a centre that treats all those in need, regardless of religion.

It is impossible to have reconciliation without the awareness of the entire population. In this respect, radio stations have the potential to make a massive difference. At present, the technology only allows stations to transmit signals over a distance of 60 miles. The speaker emphasized the need to improve this improvement and also for a dedicated radio station that is committed to promoting reconciliation. For this station to be heard by all, it is extremely important for each village to have a radio.

Young people must also be brought together in farming projects. Different groups need to work side by side in order to be able to forget the hatred. For the past two years, no one has been able to farm the land and there are no

more seeds left in the CAR; everything has been razed to the ground. Instead of handing out food aid, NGOs should distribute seeds to enable the population to feed itself. The speaker concluded by saying that this and the solutions mentioned above are the best chance of bringing a peaceful climate to the CAR once more.

SUMMARY OF Q&A

Questions

The first speaker stated that there is a need for a UN mission in the CAR; what are the reasons for this?

How is the interfaith platform organized at the national level?

Dieudonné Nzapalainga

There are concrete issues that call for a UN mission. In theory, soldiers should not use mobile phones while on duty; however, this is what is happening in the CAR right now. Mobile phones played a part in the Burundi / Chad dispute. Furthermore, the Burundian troops in the CAR do not have their own vehicles or many material resources. Troops must be given the means to be efficient. The French troops are well-equipped but the Africans are not. How can Africa control its own destiny if it cannot be efficient? For this to happen, the CAR needs its partners in the developed world to help.

Omar Kabine Layama

The platform has operations all over the country and was operational before the Séléka fighters took power. In more than ten cities across the CAR, leaders have been chosen to organize local platforms. All three religious leaders have established trust among many people, particularly young people and women. It is not just in Bangui; the platform exists wherever there is a multifaith population.

Questions

The archbishop has stated that he seeks a UN mission in order to bolster poorly equipped African troops. Could the mandate be given to the African Union or is it strictly a UN force that is needed?

Are there any ideological motivations behind any of the violence? Was there one side that initiated the violence or did it come from the grassroots?

Dieudonné Nzapalainga

The crisis in CAR should be viewed as a global issue. It is not just African; it has global implications. The scope of the damage in the country necessitates a global response. The UN is a group of nations and other nations within this group must stand up with the CAR. The UN is needed not just for its military capabilities but also for its political and administrative abilities. This is why a UN mandate in the CAR is necessary.

Omar Kabine Layama

The CAR has vast and porous borders with the likes of Chad, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The country is currently a powder keg and is beset by huge challenges such as drugs, weapons and people trafficking. A UN mission would be useful for all of these reasons.

Dieudonné Nzapalainga

An accumulation of injustices led to frustration, which led to the violence that is prevalent today. People lost their cool and decided that revenge was the answer. As such, a dynamic of violence versus violence exists. It is very difficult to halt this dynamic. If the CAR had been a functioning state at the outbreak of violence, then it could have been stopped. However, the government was unable to hear the pleas of the poor. This is why people created their own system of 'justice'.

Omar Kabine Layama

The anti-balaka originally started as a self-defence group. However, this militia now has thousands of ex-presidential guards vying to get back into power. They did not want an NTC; they wanted a constitutional return to power. Séléka, on the other hand, are unable to accept defeat and are retreating to the north of the CAR in order to regroup.

Questions

What are the delegation's experiences and expectations of the new leadership of the CAR?

What are the economic motivations for the on-going conflict?

What does the delegation recommend that the nation's youth do once all arms have finally been laid down?

Omar Kabine Layama

The delegation is very happy with the election result. President Samba-Panza's background is in civil society and she is not affiliated with either of the warring groups. The new president is committed to long-term reconciliation and it is very important that a non-partisan leader has been elected. The expectation is that she will create a technocratic government and the delegation urges the people of the CAR to support the new president in her difficult task.

There has been a lot of greed in the CAR in recent years. Politicians have used the country's natural resources as a mechanism for keeping themselves in power. The presence of many foreign mercenaries in the country is also primarily due to the country's resource wealth. These mercenaries are all based in the mining areas. If security does not return to the CAR soon then all of the resources will be plundered.

Dieudonné Nzapalainga

All of the country's youths must be disarmed. As long as they have not committed atrocities, those with vocational skills should be allowed to join the national army. Those who have committed atrocities should have no place in the army. It is important that lies are not sold to the young people of the CAR. The young can be reintegrated into trades and agriculture. Many of them were simply followers and were manipulated into taking part in the violence. It is important that these young people consider their futures. However, if the wrong people join the army they will continue to cause harm to the community. The CAR is not a military republic and has no need for a vast armed force.

Comment

It is certainly over-simplistic to claim that the conflict is primarily due to a power struggle between Christians and Muslims. Indeed, the speaker mentioned that many anti-balaka hold animist beliefs.

Dieudonné Nzapalainga

When Séléka came to take power in the CAR, they recruited members from both Sudan and Chad. Fighters simply crossed the porous borders with their weapons in search of conflict. These mercenaries do not speak either of the

official languages of the CAR; they speak Arabic. Many people have jumped to conclusions; it is wrong to say that Muslim equals Séléka and vice versa. The anti-balaka movement has existed since the early 1990s and its role was to patrol highways in order to prevent robberies. Anti-balaka are used to fighting Chadian farmers who use land in the CAR for grazing, but, this does not mean that they are a Christian group. Many of them cover themselves in animist charms which they believe make them invulnerable to attack. They do attack Muslims, however; it all makes for a dynamic of very nasty violence.

Omar Kabine Layama

The media has instrumentalized the religious aspect of the conflict by focusing on the Muslim and Christian militias. These militias, however, have no religious leaders. There are no priests, no pastors and no imams directing them. Jihadists from Chad, Sudan and Qatar are all heavily involved but there is absolutely no justified religious aspect to this crisis.