

LEAVING THE EMBERS HOT

**HUMANITARIAN CHALLENGES IN THE
CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC**

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FIELD REPORT | FEBRUARY 2019



Cover Photo: A man stands in front of the ruins of his home in Bangassou, Central African Republic. Photo by Refugees International.

***PSEUDONYMS WERE USED FOR ALL DISPLACED CENTRAL AFRICANS.**

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SUMMARY

The people of the Central African Republic (CAR) have been mired in cycles of violence since the country became independent from France in 1960. These cycles have been driven by overlapping tensions between armed groups, religious and ethnic groups, and herders and farmers. As a result, CAR has endured repeated outbreaks of conflict, population displacement, alarming food insecurity, and limited access to basic services and economic opportunities.

In 2013, the country once again descended into civil war when the Muslim-majority Séléka group staged a coup against the Christian-dominated government. Following the coup, supporters of that government formed the Anti-Balaka coalition. Clashes between the two groups led to vicious cycles of revenge attacks and a quick deterioration of the country's security infrastructure. Hopes for peace grew when talks brought the civil war to an end in 2014 and elections were held the following year. However, the country remains deeply unstable.

In recent years, armed groups have continued to manipulate religion to incite inter-communal conflict. The most recent cycle of violence has uprooted a quarter of the small country's population – the highest number since the peak of the civil war. The UN estimates that 2.9 million of the country's 4.6 million citizens need humanitarian aid. However, the humanitarian response fails to provide for all those in need due to the limited access caused by logistical and security impediments, weak coordination, and gaps in funding.

New armed groups have formed and risen to prominence in the country, alliances are constantly shifting, and factions break off in the struggle for control of land and resources. Although some state authority has been re-established since the end of the civil war, the humanitarian situation has yet to improve significantly. More than 80 percent of the country is under the sole control of armed groups.

Armed factions have repeatedly attacked displacement camps—in many cases, despite the presence of peacekeepers. The failure to protect these camps has fueled the CAR government's premature push to close some of them and have their populations return to their areas of origin, and this has taken place without determining whether such returns are safe and without monitoring conditions upon return. In late 2018, many densely populated sites were closed without warning.

Despite this bleak picture, the prospects for peace have gradually increased. On February 5, 2019, the CAR government and 14 armed groups signed an African Union-led peace accord, known as the African Initiative.¹ The UN peacekeeping mission, whose mandate has been renewed for the year, has been successful in brokering peace agreements at the local level, thus reducing the levels of violence in key areas and allowing hundreds of thousands to return to their areas of origin.

To better understand CAR's recurring cycles of violence and displacement, Refugees International (RI) traveled in the country from November to December 2018. The team

1. "Closing Ceremony: Peace Agreement between the Government of the Central African Republic and 14 Armed Groups," February 5, 2019, <https://au.int/en/newsevents/20190205/closing-ceremony-peace-agreement-between-government-central-african-republic-and>.

conducted field research in Bangui, Paoua, and Bangassou. RI found that more locally tailored, coordinated, and robust responses would make the humanitarian response more effective in meeting urgent needs. Specific improvements would allow UN agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to overcome many of the challenges confronting the humanitarian response and better safeguard human life.

On the ground, UN agencies and aid organizations must strengthen their coordination, ensure that new UN leadership will protect and adhere to humanitarian principles, and increase the transparency of their analyses and programming. At about 4.6 million, the country has a relatively small population compared to other African countries in the throes of displacement crises, and the emergency in CAR presents an opportunity to effect real change. Concerted action now could prevent the further degradation of the humanitarian situation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Central African government must:

- **Temporarily suspend organized returns of displaced populations.** The government should pause its efforts to return displaced populations through its PARET² return initiative. Future returns should be based on a more robust effort to survey the intentions of the displaced and conditions in the areas of return. The findings of these surveys and plans for future returns or camp closures should be coordinated closely with the United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator and the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT).

UN leadership must:

- **Mobilize critical support through another CAR donor conference.** It has been two years since the European Commission held the last donor conference in Brussels. Although that conference focused on stabilization funds, a new one should be hosted with NGO support to mobilize donors to provide more flexible humanitarian funding.
- **Appoint another strong Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator/Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General (RC/HC/DSRSG).** The departure of the current incumbent—a well-respected leader in the CAR humanitarian community—appears to be imminent. The appointment of a similarly capable successor must be a top priority.
- **Review UN participation in the PARET initiative.** The Humanitarian Coordinator should convene the HCT to review UN participation in the PARET initiative. As part of that review, the HCT should develop a joint position on the conditions that must be in place for UN agencies to participate in population returns and camp closures. Such conditions should include more robust efforts to survey the intentions of the displaced and conditions in areas of return.
- **Strengthen the UN cluster coordination system.** The UN should ensure that all members of the cluster system have access to the findings of their ongoing performance evaluation conducted by each cluster. The Humanitarian Coordinator should work with the leadership

2. PARET is an acronym for the initiative's French name: Projet d'Appui au Retour et à la réintégration en RCA.

of the clusters to develop and oversee a plan to address identified shortcomings, especially as they pertain to protection.

- **Bolster the UN's capacity to assess security conditions on the roads used for aid delivery.** The United Nations Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS), with support from donors and the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), should strengthen its ability to provide up-to-date security assessments of roads to rationalize and minimize the use of armed escorts for humanitarian personnel.

The United States government must:

- **Designate the Central African Republic as a Country of Particular Concern.** The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom should recommend that CAR be designated as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) in light of the prevalence of religious marginalization—a problem that the CAR government has largely ignored. Samuel D. Brownback, Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo should then designate CAR as a CPC and create a binding agreement for the United States to assist the CAR government in increasing its capacity to protect its people and their religious freedom.

Donor governments and institutions must:

- **Increase funding.** Donor governments must provide longer-term financial support for humanitarian assistance—especially to address food security and child protection—and should coordinate to fully fund the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) 2019 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) request for \$430 million to assist those in need.
- **Strengthen oversight of the implementation of the PARET return initiative.** Donors should exercise greater oversight of the conditions surrounding the population returns carried out as part of the CAR government PARET initiative. They should push for more robust intention surveys of the displaced and stronger coordination of future returns or camp closures under the leadership of the Humanitarian Coordinator and across the HCT.
- **Fund the UN's Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS).** UNHAS has funding to operate only until April 1, 2019. Given the widespread violence and limited road access in CAR, humanitarian groups rely on UNHAS to transport lifesaving material. Donors should provide full coverage of UNHAS's \$13 million budget for 2019.
- **Encourage the development of locally customized programs.** By viewing CAR's crisis as a series of localized emergencies that require different remedies, donors can better equip humanitarian organizations to address root causes at the local level.
- **Provide flexible multiyear humanitarian funding.** The volatile security context often forces humanitarian organizations to pause operations and slows down the provision of aid; donors should offer multiyear funding to give these organizations more time to work around access issues and security concerns.
- **Extend and bolster the Bêkou Trust Fund.** The Bêkou Trust Fund facilitates the transition from emergency response to longer-term recovery. The European Commission must extend Bêkou beyond 2020, and more donor countries should consider contributing to it.

BACKGROUND

Years of instability in the Central African Republic (CAR) have led to massive displacement and a desperate need for increased international aid. Violence and poor infrastructure obstruct access to food and basic services. In 2019, more than half of its population will rely on humanitarian assistance for protection and survival. Donor interest has been fading, however, despite increasing geopolitical attention on the country.

The current crisis erupted in 2013, when the Séléka, a Muslim-dominated armed group, staged a coup against the Christian-majority government. In an effort to defend state authority, the Anti-Balaka coalition was formed and more violence ensued, creating vicious cycles of revenge attacks and causing a rapid deterioration of the state infrastructure.

CAR's humanitarian crisis is the third worst in the world in the number of citizens per capita in need.

Armed groups committed atrocious crimes and instrumentalized religious beliefs to fan the flames of intercommunal conflict. Cycles of revenge attacks caused the state to collapse and forced more than 1 million people to flee their homes. In late 2014, the UN Security Council established the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) in an effort to stop the bloodshed. In that same year, national reconciliation efforts helped bring the civil war to an end. Hopes for sustained peace continued to grow after the country's peaceful 2015 elections, but little has changed.



Five years on, while a semblance of state authority has been re-established in the capital city of Bangui, local armed groups control much of the rest of the country, and the humanitarian situation is deteriorating. Roughly the size of the state of Texas, with a population of only 4.6 million, CAR's humanitarian crisis is the third worst in the world in the number of citizens per capita in need. Currently, more than 643,000 people are internally displaced,³ and 574,000 have sought refuge in neighboring countries – the highest numbers since the peak of the civil war in 2013.⁴ The UN estimates that 2.9 million of the country's 4.6 million citizens need humanitarian aid.

The fighting in CAR is highly localized, and the dynamics of conflict shift from community to community. Sectarian tensions are often key drivers of the violence. The identity of armed factions and their religious composition, strength, and ambitions vary greatly from town to town. As a result, there is no “one-size-fits-all” solution to the violence that drives displacement in communities across the country.

New geopolitical dynamics have further complicated the situation. In 2017, Russia announced its intention to supply arms to CAR, and the two countries concluded a cooperation agreement in August 2018. This agreement provides the national armed forces and the country's president with Russian defense and security advisors. In return, the CAR government has awarded mineral concessions to Russian companies. France and the United States opposed this deal but have been unable to derail it. Despite these negative trend lines, 2019 offers opportunities for change for CAR. The United Nations peacekeeping mission, which continues to successfully negotiate local

peace accords, has had its mandate renewed and expanded for another year. Furthermore, the African Union's African Initiative peace talks have led to an agreement between fourteen armed groups and the Central African government.⁵

Areas throughout the country face different obstacles to protecting civilians, accessing aid, and facilitating population return efforts.

These steps, though important, are only the first ones on a long road to sustainable peace. The granularity and diversity of conflict dynamics across CAR suggest that even if the African Initiative accord improves conditions, violence and displacement will continue. Areas throughout the country face different obstacles to protecting civilians, accessing aid, and facilitating population return efforts. Unfortunately, donors have provided funds to address issues from a macro level and tend to ignore the divergent localized questions. Sustainable change is possible if responses at the local level can be created to overcome local impediments.

Donors must keep in mind that, unlike other crises in Africa, CAR's relatively small size and population should make its crisis more manageable and amenable to solutions, although the issues are complex and the needs dire. Moreover, increased international attention and targeted humanitarian and development programming can help prevent further atrocities and reduce suffering. Aid organizations and donors thus must shift their

3. “2019 Plan de Réponse Humanitaire,” OCHA, accessed February 8, 2019, https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/2018_hrp_car_french_final.pdf.

4. UNHCR, “Central African Republic situation,” accessed February 13, 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/central-african-republic-situation.html>.

5. “Closing Ceremony,”

approach and view this crisis as a series of localized emergencies that require different remedies.

Limited Reach of Humanitarian Groups

Like many other humanitarian crises, underfunding weakens the aid community's ability to respond effectively. Although humanitarian organizations can identify populations of concern and emerging needs, relief organizations then struggle to address them with limited resources. Humanitarian groups are forced to pivot between the most severe emergencies, thus sometimes ignoring hard-to-reach areas and abandoning populations. As a result, the humanitarian intervention often merely contains the situation and rarely leads to sustainable improvements.

DISPLACEMENT

More than one-quarter of the CAR population is displaced. Of the 643,000 internally displaced people (IDPs), more than 400,000 live with host families, with the balance remaining in displacement camps scattered throughout the country.⁶ In neighboring countries, UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has identified 574,000 Central Africans seeking refuge (mostly in Cameroon, Chad, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo).⁷

Over the course of 2018, more than 300,000 CAR refugees and IDPs returned home. However, there has been a clear lack of effective planning either to support these returning populations or monitor government-initiated returns. These populations have received little assistance in rebuilding their homes and limited access to livelihoods,

food, and basic services. They remain vulnerable to violence and protection violations.

Service provision continues to be precarious. Displaced people living with host families struggle to have their needs met and often deplete the already limited resources of their hosts. Displacement sites are often overcrowded, as masses of people huddle close to humanitarian actors and MINUSCA bases. Despite this proximity, access to food, basic water and sanitation facilities, or security are not guaranteed in these displacement camps. The majority of IDPs live in makeshift shelters that often do not withstand the country's rainy seasons.

Most of the country is not accessible by road. Where roads do exist, many are unusable because of damaged infrastructure or the presence of armed groups. Negotiating access through regions they control is extremely challenging. Some armed groups have required the Humanitarian Coordinator to negotiate directly with them to broker agreements that last for only a few weeks. Local organizations could help gain humanitarian access but most of them lack the necessary funds to undertake such activity.

Most of the country is not accessible by road. Where roads do exist, many are unusable because of damaged infrastructure or the presence of armed groups.

Protection violations are prevalent throughout CAR. Ranging from kidnappings and sexual

6. "2019 Plan de Réponse Humanitaire."

7. UNHCR, "Central African Republic situation," accessed February 13, 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/central-african-republic-situation.html>.

violence and abuse of children, women, and men to arbitrary detentions and executions, these forms of abuse are often a tactic used by armed groups. The scale and scope of protection threats have only increased, but protection monitoring and programming have not kept pace. The prevalence of extreme poverty and widespread impunity heighten the risks of exploitation and abuse, but current monitoring efforts do not effectively cover all regions. Where monitoring activities are conducted, high numbers of violations have been documented, but there is no holistic response, which should include referrals for specialized medical and psychosocial assistance, legal support, and case monitoring and follow-up from protection staff.

LOCALIZED CONFLICT AND ACCELERATED RETURNS

In recent years, religious and interethnic tensions have continued to flare up across the country, and attacks on humanitarian personnel remain common occurrences. To better understand some of the different dynamics driving conflict and displacement in CAR, RI traveled to Bangui, the capital city; Paoua in the northwest; and Bangassou in the center south.

The area surrounding the city of Paoua witnessed a surge in fighting between armed groups from late 2017 to March 2018, causing more than 75,000 people to flee into the city.⁸ Since then, the UN peacekeeping forces have stabilized a 50-kilometer radius around

8. OCHA, Bulletin Humanitaire République centrafricaine, Numéro 37, Juillet/Aout 2018, accessed February 8, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/central-african-republic/bulletin-humanitaire-r-publique-centrafricaine-num-ro-37-juilletao-t>.



Former IDP shelter in Paoua. Photo by Refugees International.

the city, allowing the return of more than 60,000 people to the surrounding villages.⁹ Areas beyond the secured zone remain dangerous, however; many returnees have gone without assistance, and monitoring their situation has not been made a priority by the government and humanitarian organizations.

At the height of the civil war, Bangassou was praised for the peaceful coexistence of its Muslim and Christian inhabitants. In spring 2017, however, armed groups entered the town and attacked Muslim communities. More than 2,000 displaced persons sought refuge on the grounds of the local cathedral, just a 30-minute walk away from their destroyed homes. Although humanitarian actors initially assisted the affected communities, insecurity continued to reign. Over the course of winter 2017-2018, rebels looted the city and attacked aid workers, causing many to shut down their operations. Aid actors have subsequently returned, but most of the displaced have not been able to return to their neighborhoods, and stabilization gains rarely have been sustained.

Over the course of fall 2018, humanitarian actors repeatedly sounded the alarm that yet more violence was imminent throughout the country. They called for additional resources and an increased MINUSCA presence in key areas, but their requests went unheeded. Between October and December 2018, armed groups attacked three IDP camps in Batangafo, Alindao, and Ippy, killing hundreds of innocent civilians—many of them children. The head of an international NGO stressed that “these attacks were foretold, forewarned, and not acted upon.” A protection advisor from the UN peacekeeping force explained that they were often well aware of the next hotspot destined to erupt but lacked the capacity to address the problem preemptively: “We’ll go, but as always, we’ll be too late,” he lamented.

Most survivors of these attacks have returned to the destroyed camps—not because they felt it was safe to do so, but because it was their best chance of receiving humanitarian aid. Of the thousands who went back, many children returned alone. Many of the displaced tend to settle close to MINUSCA bases in the hope that they will be better protected. However, militias have repeatedly targeted peacekeepers as well as surrounding displaced communities, and directly attacked civilian populations.

The PARET Initiative

The inability to protect displacement sites across the country has been used by the CAR government to justify its push to close camps. In recent months, large, densely populated sites have been closed abruptly without any warning to camp management or implementing partners. Inhabitants have received limited support to go back by PARET, a joint effort between the CAR government and UNHCR. The initiative aims to “accelerate returns,” but other humanitarian actors have limited visibility of its planning and operations.¹⁰ In Bambari, displacement sites were suddenly shut down by PARET, without warning camp management groups. More than 48,000 displaced persons were affected. Reports indicate that these IDPs were each given 50,000 Central African Francs (close to \$100), presumably to go home or resettle elsewhere.

PARET staff indicated that they first conduct intention surveys within displaced communities. If the data show that people wish to return, they then provide them with assistance to do so. However, other aid organizations with protection equities told RI that they did not have access to PARET’s detailed methodology or findings, thus limiting their ability to verify the information. RI received a copy of the terms of reference of one of PARET’s data

9. “Bulletin Humanitaire Republique centrafricaine, Numero 37.”

10. For more information about PARET’s approach, see <http://www.paretrca.org/>.

collection missions to Bangassou. The document suggests weaknesses in the survey methodology. Surveys appear to be conducted too quickly to collect a sample size large enough to be statistically representative of a population's intentions. For example, Bangassou's IDP camp houses around 1500 people. A representative survey of the population would require roughly 300 people be interviewed. However, this would be extremely difficult for PARET's small team to conduct in two and a half days—the period of time allocated for data collection.

Shortly after RI's field mission, PARET closed another displacement site—the Sangaris Camp—in Bambari between December 27 and 30, 2018. UNHCR has since shared an internal report¹¹ on the camp closure process. That report suggests that improvements have been made to plan and coordinate these closures with relevant humanitarian partners. RI welcomes these improvements. However, RI shares UNHCR's concerns—noted in section 8 of the report—regarding the challenges of returning populations to areas where conditions remain difficult – including with limited or no access to water or proper shelter.

Indeed, a dozen UN agencies and international organizations expressed great concern to RI regarding returns prior to the closure of Sangaris camp. They stressed that little is being done to assess conditions in the areas of return before carrying them out; they also expressed deep concern about the absence of follow-up to assess how people are being resettled. Furthermore, nearly every aid worker with whom RI spoke indicated that the UN's involvement in PARET was a concern. A senior UN representative went so far as to say that the UN's involvement marked a break with the principle of “do no harm.” RI was informed that UN agencies and NGOs

requested that PARET be more forthcoming with its plans to shut down camps during a joint meeting in late January 2019. We welcome reports that PARET expressed its willingness to do so, and encourage UNHCR, as a PARET initiative partner, to ensure that this request is fulfilled.

Although voluntary returns do occur and should be supported, the push for widespread, organized returns is alarming. Aid organizations were concerned that PARET's timelines were driven by the fact that the government has stabilization funds to spend on post-conflict recovery (including those stemming from the last donor conference on the country, held in 2016).¹² Some of these stabilization funds expire in 2020 and may therefore be creating an incentive to push for returns before conditions are appropriate. The Humanitarian Coordinator should call on all heads of UN agencies in CAR to oppose the push for returns under current circumstances and the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) should develop a joint UN position regarding conditions conducive to safe returns and camp closures—and a joint strategy to remedy the situation.


OTHER HUMANITARIAN CHALLENGES

Food Insecurity

In addition to violence, displacement, and premature returns, food security and protection for vulnerable children and youth pose serious challenges to the humanitarian community. According to the World Food Program (WFP) and the UN Office for

11. “UNHCR et PARET, Rapport de la fermeture du site de Sangaris, 30 janvier 2019,” Documentation provided to Refugees International by UNHCR CAR on February 19, 2019.

12. “€2.06 billion to support the Central African Republic at Brussels conference” Brussels, November 17, 2016, European Commission, accessed February 13, 2019, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-16-3804_en.htm.

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Pictured is a World Food Program ration registration card for an IDP who lives in Bangassou. Photo by Refugees International.

the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), one in three children in CAR suffers from severe malnutrition.¹³ Aisha, a young displaced woman living in an IDP camp in Bangassou, told RI that for months, violence surrounding the city had completely cut off trade routes. Local markets could not be restocked, and humanitarian distributions were few and far between. Road access has improved, but many are still afraid to leave the camp, and communities in need do not have the funds to buy their own food.

Abdulaziz, another displaced person in Bangassou, showed RI his WFP ration registration card, indicating that he had received food in late August and then nothing until mid-November. Although WFP and other humanitarian organizations are providing much needed food when and where they can, the amount is not enough to sustain

families between distributions, especially considering the average displaced family comprises seven people.¹⁴ The scarcity of food has driven many people to return to their lands in time for planting season. Many IDPs indicated that they returned out of desperation for food and a desire for independence, but not because they felt it was safe to return.

Vulnerable Children and Youth

Throughout the country, child protection efforts are grossly underfunded. According to the child protection sub-cluster lead, more than 1 million children need protection, and “there isn’t a place [in CAR] where there aren’t children in great need.” Despite children accounting for 65 percent of the displaced population, their protection is not a priority.¹⁵

13. “2019 Plan de Réponse Humanitaire.”

14. République centrafricaine (RCA) Matrice de Suivi des Déplacements (DTM) Rapport 6 | Décembre 2018 p. 9, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/IOM_DTM_Rapport_RCA_round_6_20191501.pdf.

15. “République centrafricaine (RCA) Matrice de Suivi des Déplacements (DTM).”



A young woman holds her child in the Bangassou IDP camp where she gave birth. Photo by Refugees International.

“There isn’t a place [in CAR] where there aren’t children in great need.”

-CHILD PROTECTION SUB-CLUSTER LEAD

Of the groups working on child protection, 90 percent are local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with little to no funding. As violence and displacement have risen over the last year, so have the numbers of separated, unaccompanied, and orphaned children. The same is true for child recruitment into armed groups. Little has been done to document, monitor, or assist these children, and no efforts toward reintegration have been made in recent years.

Even before the crisis, school enrollment was extremely low. Those rates plummeted as teachers and pupils were forced into displacement. School buildings have been ransacked and are being occupied by armed groups or serving as shelters for IDPs. Although some teachers are willing to return to their communities, many of them would not be paid for their work. In many communities, parents with little to no training or qualifications have stepped in to educate the children.¹⁶

Of the \$27 million requested for education projects in 2018, donors delivered \$3.2 million. According to OCHA’s Financial Tracking Service, the European Commission provided more than \$2 million; the remainder was from smaller donors. The noticeable absence of larger donors such as the United States and the United Kingdom is distressing.¹⁷ Looking ahead, the 2019 HRP has identified 1.4 million

children in need of educational assistance. Still, it requests only the modest sum of \$22.5 million to provide education for 500,000 children between the ages of 3 and 18.¹⁸

Donors must make education a priority because, as one child protection specialist explained, “education is not only vital to child development, but also in the country’s peace, as it gives children an alternative to joining armed groups.” Child recruitment into armed groups is becoming more and more common, so increasing numbers of unaccompanied children must be provided with education that may help keep them from partaking in and perpetuating the country’s cycles of violence.

HUMANITARIAN COORDINATION

The Cluster System

The traditional humanitarian cluster coordination system, comprising UN and non-UN humanitarian actors, has faced challenges since the onset of the civil war in CAR. Cluster coordination has suffered from a lack of capacity and funding for in-depth data collection on populations in need. Low telecommunications coverage throughout the country further complicates information sharing. These factors have only worsened what NGOs have dubbed the “data war”—i.e. the longstanding failure to share information within the humanitarian community. The analytical capabilities of NGOs must be strengthened through donor support, on the condition that NGOs and UN agencies commit to better data sharing practices that

16. In country, they are called “maîtres parents,” the French term.

17. “Central African Republic 2018 - Financial Tracking Service,” OCHA, accessed February 8, 2019, <https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/651/summary>.

18. OCHA, “2019 Plan de Réponse Humanitaire.”

ensure evidence-based decision making and coordination.

The work of the protection cluster merits careful review. Like all clusters, it is led by staff seconded from member organizations and mandated to impartially represent the cluster's shared priorities. However, in light of protection issues relating to the return process, many members of the protection cluster expressed concern about the support of the cluster leadership for the PARET initiative. In repeated interviews, such support was a source of significant concern and led some members to question whether the cluster was fulfilling its mandate.

According to the Global Protection Cluster's 2016 *Practical Steps for Humanitarian Coordinators and Humanitarian Country Teams*, the Humanitarian Coordinator and HCT must "provide clear direction across the response when faced with protection dilemmas."¹⁹ Given this apparent concern and the divergence of views over PARET within the protection cluster, the Humanitarian Coordinator should launch a process to take stock of the situation and provide such "clear direction." Pending more robust efforts to survey the intentions of the displaced and conditions in areas of return, RI expects that any such review would result in a pause on PARET's camp closure and return efforts.

More broadly, members of the cluster system in CAR are currently assessing cluster performance anonymously through online surveys. It is very important that cluster leads be transparent regarding the results. Refugees International welcomes initial efforts to socialize the findings of these surveys in some clusters. However, the Humanitarian Coordinator should oversee a system-wide effort to address concerns raised in these surveys.

Finally, coordination meetings outside of Bangui are held in an ad hoc fashion in areas where OCHA does not have an established presence. These areas, such as Bangassou, need official coordination mechanisms. RI urges OCHA, with donor support, to increase its presence in key areas across the country to promote coordination of local strategies.

Leadership and Staff

Over the last two years, the humanitarian community in CAR has benefitted from having strong leadership at the top of the UN system in country. However, the current Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator/Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General (RC/HC/DSRSG), appears set to rotate out of country. It is essential that she be replaced by a leader with a strong humanitarian background and an ability to juggle conflicting priorities. During her time in country, she has managed to increase donor engagement, negotiate humanitarian access through her direct talks with armed groups, and defended humanitarian organizations and their principles. These gains must be sustained by the new appointment.

The effectiveness of the response also suffers from the lack of experienced staff. The CAR humanitarian crisis is complicated by extreme poverty, huge mineral wealth alongside a plethora of armed groups, historical intercommunal tensions, and conflicting regional and international agendas. Heads of agencies and other organizations noted to RI that they struggle to find suitable staff with the experience required to navigate the country's complexities effectively.

19. "The Centrality of Protection: Practical Steps for Humanitarian Coordinators and Humanitarian Country Teams," accessed February 8, 2019, http://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/_assets/files/tools_and_guidance/essential-protection-guidance/hc-hct-centrality-of-protection-in-practice-note.pdf.



A WFP Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) flight in Paoua. Photo by Refugees International.

IMPROVING ACCESS FOR AID WORKERS

Humanitarian access is limited throughout the country because of logistical challenges and the security concerns discussed above. Much of the country is not accessible by roads, and less than 3 percent of the existing roads are paved.²⁰ Even areas that have roads are often rendered inaccessible because of damage incurred during the rainy season, destroyed bridges, or the presence of armed groups.

The WFP's Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) plays a crucial role in overcoming these access limitations. Aid organizations rely on UNHAS to transport lifesaving material and staff, as well as conduct emergency evacuations. UNHAS also coordinates airstrip construction and rehabilitation with organizations on the ground to reach new areas. The importance of UNHAS's work cannot be overstated. However, in December 2018, WFP warned that UNHAS would soon cease operations because of a lack of funding. By late January 2019, the Central African Republic Humanitarian Fund (CHF) and the Swiss government had stepped in to provide stopgap funds to allow UNHAS to fly through April 1, 2019, but there is a very high risk that flights will cease shortly thereafter. Donors must coordinate immediately to provide full coverage of UNHAS's \$13 million budget for 2019.

Given the pervasive insecurity throughout CAR, the United Nations Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) often requires UN organizations to travel with MINUSCA escorts. Based on UNDSS's road assessment published in the 2019 HRP, more than half of the country's roads are identified as "high

risk" and thus require armed escorts.²¹ This system mandates that road assessments be conducted regularly, but UNDSS teams are currently too small to meet the demand. Staff from multiple UN agencies reported to RI that many roads deemed too dangerous in the past no longer require MINUSCA escorts. In their view, UN humanitarian staff were being compelled to compromise on humanitarian principles by using armed escorts on roads where they were no longer necessary.

The safety and security of UN staff must, of course, remain a top priority for UNDSS and the UN leadership in country. However, UNDSS should consider the deployment of additional staff to CAR to conduct assessments. In addition, MINUSCA – which provides the escorts – and UNDSS should strengthen their information sharing to fill critical information gaps and provide up-to-date security assessments of remote areas. Security focal points from UN agencies in CAR should participate in these assessment missions. Moreover, the UNDSS road assessment must be immediately translated into French, all UNDSS staff must be trained on how to use it, and a new road assessment must be conducted without further delay.

DONOR FATIGUE AND SMARTER FUNDING

Since the outbreak of the 2013-2014 civil war, yearly estimates have consistently shown that more than 2 million people in CAR need humanitarian assistance—nearly half the population. However, since 2016, donors have consistently provided less than 50 percent of the funding requested by annual response plans.²² Chronic underfunding

20. "Bulletin Humanitaire République centrafricaine Numéro 40 | Décembre 2018," accessed February 8, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/central-african-republic/bulletin-humanitaire-r-publique-centrafricaine-num-ro-40-d-cembre>.

21. "2019 Plan de Réponse Humanitaire."

22. "Central African Republic 2018 - Financial Tracking Service," OCHA, accessed February 8, 2019, <https://fts.unocha.org/>

has effectively prohibited relief groups from responding to humanitarian needs until they become full-blown crises. A senior UN official described the state of the aid community in CAR as “of a pathetic weakness.” Another stated, “We don’t have enough money to do the job right. We are only putting out fires but leaving the embers hot.”

The lack of funding has also slowed relief groups’ response times to new outbreaks of violence. Numerous humanitarian staff expressed to RI grave concerns about the lack of funding provided for contingency planning and acquiring and storing relief stocks. For example, following the November 15, 2018, attack on the Alindao displacement camp, it took some NGOs more than a week to mobilize the funds and acquire the stock needed to assist nearly 20,000 camp residents. In determining pledges for 2019, donors must consider contingency planning and preparedness as paramount to saving lives and enabling humanitarian actors to immediately provide critical assistance after the onset of a humanitarian emergency.

“We don’t have enough money to do the job right. We are only putting out fires but leaving the embers hot.”

-UN OFFICIAL

For this year’s CAR humanitarian response, OCHA has requested \$430 million to provide for 1.7 million people who are extremely vulnerable.²³ Compared to other countries faced with devastating humanitarian crises, the population of CAR is relatively small; thus,

the proportion of need within its population of 4.6 million is extremely high but the scale should be manageable for the international community. Donors should fully fund this appeal. To this end, the UN should organize a donor conference for CAR – the first since the one held in Brussels more than two years ago. A new conference should mobilize donors and provide aid groups with smarter, more flexible funding (see below).

Smarter Funding

One way for donors to make their funding more effective in CAR would be to allow for more flexible timeframes for implementation. Security risks often force humanitarian organizations to put their programs on hold. Most donors traditionally provide short-term funding (usually for about a year). This timeframe forces NGOs to apply for a “no-cost extension.” If granted, the organization is given permission to extend its projects using the same predetermined budget. This process is time consuming and can sometimes jeopardize an NGO’s prospects for receiving future funding. With donors that provide “performance-based” funding, such as the CHF, pausing operations reflects badly on an NGO’s performance record.

However, at least one donor has adapted to the realities on the ground. Sweden gives humanitarian organizations up to 46 months to implement projects. Other donors should adopt this kind of practice. Providing humanitarian organizations with longer timeframes for implementation would allow greater room to work around the shifting security landscape. It also would mean they could spend less time on paperwork and more time on delivery.

appeals/651/summary.

23. “2019 Plan de Réponse Humanitaire.”

Closing the Humanitarian-Development Divide

The need for humanitarian assistance is likely to remain very strong in CAR for years to come. However, part of paving the way to peace is supporting recovery and development efforts in communities emerging from conflict. Unfortunately, donors have put few resources into this type of programming in CAR. The Bêkou Trust Fund is the exception. Established by the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO), Bêkou provides an agile donor tool to quickly inject resources into communities emerging from humanitarian disaster to help them recover. The fund pools different budgetary instruments from the European Commission to enable projects to be established quickly and eventually transition them from emergency to development programming.

Unfortunately, Bêkou's future is somewhat uncertain. In December, it was extended until 2020, but as of now has only 50 million Euros on offer (with contributions from the European Union, France, Germany, and Italy). Given its importance and uniqueness, donor countries in Europe and beyond, such as the Scandinavian countries, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Japan, should strongly consider contributing to Bêkou.

STRENGTHENING U.S. ENGAGEMENT

For some time, the U.S. government generally has adopted a hands-off approach on CAR. This situation has changed over the last year and is reflected in part by the January 2019,

the U.S. appointment of Lucy Tamlyn to serve as its ambassador to CAR. RI welcomes this step and urges the ambassador to increase U.S. engagement by calling for an increased presence and funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

Addressing the grave human rights violations committed in the country is essential, and the United States can help. For years, religious groups have been marginalized and made the victims of targeted killings, and the risk of mass atrocity continues to rise. Yet the CAR government has taken only limited steps to address these egregious violations or promote religious reconciliation. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom should recommend that CAR be designated as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for “systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom”²⁴ over the course of 2018. This designation would unlock diplomatic and political options that the United States could take to help the CAR government protect threatened and marginalized religious groups and prevent further violations. Such measures might include encouraging and advising government officials on transitional justice mechanisms, developing responses to religious marginalization, and sponsoring interfaith dialogue and reconciliation efforts.

Once CAR is recommended as a CPC, Samuel D. Brownback, Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo should designate CAR as a CPC and create a binding agreement for the United States to provide training, expertise, and funding to increase the CAR government's capacity to protect religious freedoms.

24. “1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA),” accessed February 8, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/2297.pdf>.

CONCLUSION

The lack of international attention and financial support has left CAR citizens trapped in continual cycles of immense need. The most recent scourge of violence in the country is distressing but not unstoppable. The African Union's African Initiative peace agreement offers hope but is merely the beginning of the road to peace. The presence of violence and the resulting humanitarian need and displacement will continue, but the crisis can be addressed in time and with a concerted effort.

To protect its citizens, the CAR government must put on hold its plans to shut the camps and return their populations until its longer-term plans are far better developed and provide greater safeguards to protect and support the returnees. Humanitarian actors must work with UN agencies to better coordinate local-level responses that address the growing needs of the vulnerable people of CAR. Donors can play a crucial role by providing more assistance and allowing more time and flexibility for humanitarian groups to work around the obstacles that exist in such a volatile context. For their part, UN leadership must ensure that UN agencies provide broader coverage throughout the country and act in accordance with humanitarian principles.

Of course, the people of CAR deserve sustainable peace. Increased international attention and investment are key to fostering a more prosperous future for them and making CAR an example of how to surmount immense needs and bridge divides.

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