



EXPERIENCES FROM THE FIELD

THE UNCEASING CRISES OF THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

A country endowed with abundant natural resources, yet paralyzed by a multifaceted (from the economy to health to security) and seemingly unresolvable crisis, the Central African Republic has yet to find a path to genuine self-determination, peace and lasting development.

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A landlocked country located in the heart of Africa, the Central African Republic (CAR) is vast – more than twice the size of Italy – and has a population of some 4.9 million. Endowed with abundant natural resources, the country is a prime example of the phenomenon known as the "natural resource curse": not only does its government fail to provide basic services and well-being to its citizens, but CAR has also been torn by internal conflicts since it gained independence from France in 1960.

Today, the vast majority of the population is increasingly poor and vulnerable, due to widespread violence against civilians and the overall state of insecurity, especially outside major urban centers, which are more heavily patrolled by government forces. The U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimates that next year, out of its estimated population of 4.9 million (it is impossible to take a census), as many as 3.4 million individuals – nearly 70% of the total – will require humanitarian assistance and protection, a figure up 10% from 2022. Two million of these individuals are expected to have such severe and complex needs that their very mental and physical well-being will be at risk. OCHA also estimates that as of 31 October 2022, there were 505,059 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in CAR, 28% of whom now reside in 81 reception centers and 72% in host families. In October, the number of new IDPs (29,279) was far greater than the number of people who chose to return to their places of origin (8,555). The reasons for people's flight from their homes included violence and other atrocities perpetrated by armed attackers in some areas, and climate disasters such as heavy rains and flooding in others, including the Ouham-Pendé and Ouham prefectures.

CAR currently ranks 188th on the Human Development Index, of the 189 countries for which the measurement is calculated, and 71% of its population is estimated to be living below the international poverty line (\$1.90 per day per person). Moreover, the cumulative effect of local and global crises, including the growing cost of basic necessities due to the war in Ukraine, the coronavirus pandemic, and the climate crisis, have made people's living conditions even worse; it is estimated that 3 million Central Africans now live in a state of acute food insecurity (IPC Phases 3 and 4).

After a succession of periods alternating between violence and

relative peace, the civil war that broke out in 2012-13 ushered in a new phase of violence and instability. In response, the French government launched a military intervention ("Operation Sangaris") which succeeded in reinstating a certain degree of calm, and the U.N. Security Council gave the go-ahead for the deployment of a peacekeeping operation known as MINUSCA. When Operation Sangaris came to an end in 2016-17, however, violence flared up once again and the humanitarian situation began to deteriorate. In 2019, after peace agreements were signed between the government and 14 armed groups following negotiations in Sudan, many felt cause for tempered optimism, but the peace was to be short-lived.

In fact, President Touadéra's re-election win in the 2020 elections was vehemently disputed, and launched a new period of violence between the Central African Armed Forces (FACA), which are supported by the UN mission MINUSCA and private Russian security operatives linked to the Wagner Group (following the 2018 signing of an agreement between the governments of CAR and Russia), and a new coalition of armed rebel groups called the "Coalition of Patriots for Change" (CPC), led by former President Bozizé, which also includes several signatories to the 2019 peace agreements.

The government relies heavily on foreign aid for the provision of public services and the functioning of its administration, with external funds accounting for more than 40% of the annual national budget. However, due in part to growing Russian influence in the country (witnesses have linked Russian-identified forces to various massacres, human rights violations, and war crimes against the Central African population itself), the amount of development aid provided to the country has recently fallen considerably, diminishing the ability of government authorities to contribute to humanitarian response and coordination actions. Outside the capital city of Bangui, in fact, while the Russian (Wagner)-backed FACA forces have regained control of most of the country's main cities, large swathes of territory remain under the control of a range of armed groups, leading to continued clashes with security and defense forces and their allies. Now, with the upcoming withdrawal (by the end of December 2022) of the French armed forces still in the country, Russian influence will undoubtedly continue to grow, and the country's future to become increasingly uncertain.