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U.S. Response to Chaos in the Central African Republic

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Chaos in the Central African Republic (CAR) threatens stability beyond its borders. Lawless spaces allow extremist groups to operate more freely. Uncertainty has been amplified by the abrupt resignations of interim President Michel Djotodia and Prime Minister Nicolas Tiengaye.

While the U.S. has little direct interest in CAR, instability in the region and the possibility of CAR becoming a failed, lawless state demand that the U.S. not stand idle.

A Simmering Pot of Political Conflict. Since the 1960s, CAR has grappled with coups d'état, corruption, and poor economic and political governance. It is one of the world's least developed nations, ranking 180th out of 185 countries in the U.N. Human Development Index. Poor governance has allowed foreign fighters to operate in CAR, including Uganda's Lord's Resistance Army, which has undermined the government's authority and exacerbated real and perceived grievances.

CAR has grown increasingly unstable since late 2012, when successes by the Seleka, a disparate alliance of predominantly Muslim rebel militia groups, led President François Bozize to request international assistance. A January 2013 cease-fire agree-

ment established a power-sharing arrangement. But Seleka fighters did not believe the agreement was being respected and forcibly removed Bozize from power in March 2013. Djotodia, a Seleka leader, assumed power as interim president.

Djotodia was incapable or unwilling to exercise control over the Seleka. Seleka fighters are looting and enriching themselves via control over government resources and power. Roughly half of the population, approximately 2.2 million people, are believed to be in need of emergency assistance. Nearly a quarter million refugees have fled to neighboring countries and nearly a million are displaced internally, according to U.N. estimates.¹

After months of attacks by Seleka fighters, Christians formed their own groups—collectively known as anti-Balaka (“anti-machete”) militias—that have launched retaliatory attacks on Seleka fighters and Muslim communities.² The anti-Balaka militias also include those seeking to retain or regain power, those pursuing retributive violence, and those simply seeking to re-establish law and order.

Escalating religious and ethnic overtones have led some to characterize violence in CAR as genocide. While this may be a future possibility, it is not the current reality. Atrocities have been committed by both sides, and motivations are multiple. Focusing on the more recent and sensational aspects of the conflict risks dedicating insufficient attention to long-standing sources of instability.

International Intervention. Regional leaders have provided leadership in the CAR conflict and should be encouraged to continue their efforts. Since 2008, the Economic Community of Central African States had a stability operation known as the Mission

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for the Consolidation of Peace in the Central African Republic (MICOPAX). However, MICOPAX troops were poorly armed and trained, unable to provide credible force deterrence against the rebels, and ultimately incapable of maintaining law and order.

U.N. Security Council Resolution 2127 authorizes an “African-led International Support Mission in the CAR” (MISCA) to protect civilians, restore stability, protect and facilitate humanitarian efforts, and support disarmament and security-sector reform.³ It establishes an arms embargo and urges immediate accountability for those committing atrocities.

The French have committed 1,600 troops to help stabilize CAR in coordination with an African Union (AU) MISCA peacekeeping force of nearly 6,000 that incorporates the pre-existing MICOPAX forces.⁴

Given the various political and economic constraints on the stability operation, many are defining this operation as the least bad option. Whether it can bring law and order to the CAR will depend significantly on resources and international support and building trust among Central Africans and progress in implementing the political transition.

France is seeking additional support from the European Union, which has committed €50 million to support AU troops.⁵ The U.S. is providing airlift, non-lethal training, logistics, and planning support.⁶ President Obama has authorized up to \$100 million for immediate military assistance.

Eyes on the Transition. While the short-term success in CAR will be defined by improving security, CAR’s medium- and long-term stability will depend on the success of the political transition process culminating in free, fair, and transparent presidential and legislative elections scheduled for no later than February 2015. Even if MISCA and

the French troops can provide a reasonable level of stability, CAR may descend back into chaos if critical elements of the transition plan are not implemented prudently.

Groundwork for political transition is behind schedule. Djotodia delayed preparations for the elections and placed Seleka allies in key positions and as commanders of military regions. He also began incorporating Seleka fighters into the armed forces and police.

Djotodia’s failure to restore stability and suspicions about his commitment to the transition led African leaders to pressure him and Tiengaye to resign. In order to make the transition period count, the international community must not divorce the transition process from the stability operation. Of paramount importance is replacing Djotodia and Tiengaye with capable transition leaders committed to the agreed transition process.

America and other concerned parties should demand observance of the agreed terms and also insist that current and former members of the transitional government, including Djotodia and Tiengaye, not run for office. Of equal concern is holding elections prematurely, considering the lack of preparatory work under Djotodia.

Similarly, demands for immediate justice and accountability, which feature prominently in Resolution 2127, risk incentivizing Seleka and anti-Balaka militias to impede the transition process and, regardless, are beyond the capacity of CAR’s weak judicial system. Moreover, justice can take different forms, such as South Africa’s truth and reconciliation commission, and should be left to the discretion of the new government to resolve in the manner deemed most beneficial to long-term peace and stability.

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1. Voice of America News, “UN: Half of CAR in Need of Aid,” January 7, 2014, <http://www.voanews.com/content/un-says-half-of-car-needs-aid/1824723.html> (accessed January 13, 2014).
 2. Alexis Arieff, “Responding to the Humanitarian, Security and Governance Crisis in the Central Africa Republic,” testimony before the Subcommittee on African Affairs, Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate, December 17, 2013, http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Arieff_Testimony.pdf (accessed January 13, 2014).
 3. U.N. Security Council, Resolution 2127 (2013), December 5, 2013, <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/2127> (accessed January 13, 2014).
 4. Reuters, “African Union to Nearly Double Troops in CAR to 6,000—France,” December 7, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/12/07/centralafrican-france-union-idUSL5N0JMOG720131207> (accessed January 13, 2014).
 5. Africa-EU Partnership, “The EU Supports the MISCA Intervention in the Central African Republic,” December 16, 2013, <http://www.africa-eu-partnership.org/newsroom/all-news/eu-supports-misca-intervention-central-african-republic> (accessed January 13, 2014).
 6. Linda Thomas Greenfield, Assistant Secretary of State, testimony before the Subcommittee on African Affairs, Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate, December 17, 2013, http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Thomas-Greenfield_Testimony2.pdf (accessed January 13, 2014).

How the U.S. Can Help. The U.S. should:

- **Insist that former and current transitional leaders remain committed to the terms of the transition agreement.** The U.S. should impose targeted measures, including travel bans and sanctions, on those attempting to undermine the political process, endorse violent acts, or violate the U.N. arms embargo.
- **Resist replacing MISCA with a U.N. peace-keeping operation.** An adequately supported MISCA or other African-led operation builds regional capacity, increases regional investment in a solution, capitalizes on the fact the African missions tend to have aggressive mandates, and is less likely to internationalize the conflict in the eyes of Islamic extremists who may wish to capitalize on rising religious tensions.
- **Provide humanitarian assistance for refugees displaced by the crisis.** The U.S. should focus humanitarian assistance on those most in need and in a manner that helps ensure that it is not diverted.
- **Leave accountability to the post-transition government.** Re-establishing law and order is a priority for stability, but seeking to hold everyone to account immediately for crimes committed over the past year could incentivize spoilers and would overwhelm CAR's judicial system.

- **Support Christian and Muslim leaders urging peace and reconciliation.** The U.S. should continue to use public diplomacy tools, such as Voice of America-produced radio messages, to promote messages of religious moderation and discourage violence.
- **Insist on the agreed plan for political transition and support democracy promotion efforts.** Holding elections in the absence of stability and order would only exacerbate long-standing grievances in the CAR, while delaying the transition would undermine confidence that the interim government intends to allow a transition at all.

Appropriate Actions. To its credit, the Obama Administration has appropriately condemned both the Seleka and anti-Balaka killings, supported African-led stability efforts, and pressed parties to commit to a transition process. These steps are critical, and the U.S. should not let expediency divert them from this agenda.

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