

Legal framework

The Central African Republic (CAR) is a secular and democratic state. The current constitution, adopted after a national referendum in December 2015, guarantees freedom of conscience, assembly and worship. However, the constitutional provisions do not express the full definition of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) as outlined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and international treaties.

Violations of freedom of religion or belief amid wider civil conflict

On 10 December 2012 fighting broke out between the Bozizé government and the Seleka rebel alliance, leading to a significant deterioration in the human rights and humanitarian situation. The CAR had no previous history of sectarian violence, but during this time local sources noted the increased targeting of the Christian population by Seleka elements. This eventually triggered violence on Muslim communities by anti-Balaka militia who were identified as Christian, but who eventually also targeted members of the Christian community and church leaders.

In March 2016 the CAR returned to democratic rule; however, the transition period between the Seleka's seizure of power in March 2013 and the election of Faustin-Archange Touadéra in 2016 saw widespread violations, including of the right to FoRB. Violence regularly reported during the transition period included grenade attacks, bombs thrown into occupied church buildings, looting, desecration of places of worship, and the destruction of buildings providing essential social services.

Since November 2016 armed groups have splintered and are responsible for the majority of human rights violations, including of the right to FoRB.

Peace agreement

In February 2019, a peace agreement negotiated by the African Union (AU) was settled between the government and 14 armed groups operational in the country. It called for the immediate surrendering of arms by the armed groups and a cessation of hostilities. A new prime minister, Firmin Ngrebada, was appointed and a revised cabinet was announced on 22 March 2019 which included representatives of all 14 armed groups party to the agreement.

However, armed groups continued to use force to demonstrate their displeasure at the power sharing arrangements.

December 2020 elections

The security situation began deteriorating in December 2020 ahead of the presidential elections, and in the period following the election, which also marked the breakdown of the 2019 peace agreement.

Violence escalated particularly ahead of and during the country's parliamentary and presidential elections, following a Constitutional Court ruling against the candidacy of former president Bozize.

Soon afterwards, a coalition of six major armed groups

linked with Bozize that also comprised former Seleka and anti-Balaka elements known as the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC) announced its intention to disrupt the 27 December 2020 elections. It launched an extensive campaign of violence ahead of the vote that included the targeting of the president's second home in Damara.

The fighting pitted the allied militia against the national army, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), and troops from Russia and Rwanda, whose presence was secured following bilateral agreements between the CAR and their respective governments. The UN Special Representative and Head of MINUSCA, Mr Mankeur Ndiaye, reported that a government counter-offensive against the CPC had led to "an unprecedented humanitarian crisis", resulting in over 57% of the population in need of humanitarian assistance.

On 4 January 2021 President Touadéra won a second term in office, with an estimated 53.9% of votes cast, a declaration that was subsequently confirmed by the Constitutional Court on 18 January, although the political opposition demanded the annulment of the elections on the grounds that fighting had prevented over half of all registered voters from voting.

A group of UN experts, including the Working Group on Mercenaries, raised concerns in March 2021 about private military and foreign security contractors working in coordination with the government of CAR and maintaining close contact with UN peacekeepers.

UN experts cited reports from the ground that Russian contractors connected to the Wagner group, a paramilitary group which includes forces that have seen action in Syria and the Ukraine, have been implicated in gross violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, including the use of torture, summary executions and attacks on humanitarian workers.

There are also reports of the use of explosive devices such as landmines in CAR, including by Russian paramilitaries, a serious violation of international humanitarian law which impedes the work and reach of humanitarian organisations.

On 21 January 2022, AFP news agency [reported](#) a UN announcement that it would investigate reports of more than 30 civilians killed by CAR forces and Wagner Group mercenaries in a military operation on 16-17 January 2022 targeting the Union for Peace rebel group. It also reported that the UN expert group had not been functioning since 31 August 2021, when Russia blocked the renewal of its mandate.

Impunity

There are persistent concerns regarding impunity, the restoration of rule of law and securing justice for victims of violations.

A Special Criminal Court, mandated to investigate and prosecute grave violations, began investigating cases at the beginning of 2019, and in December 2021 its first hearings were scheduled. In November 2021 an arrest warrant for government minister and former member of the Union Pour la Paix en Centrafrique (UPC) armed group, Hassan Bouba,

was executed, and he was placed in custody. However, he was subsequently released despite the objection of the court and the UN Expert on CAR. The arrest was in relation for the [attack](#) on the IDP camp on the Sacred Heart Cathedral in Aliando Town in November 2018. The minister was a senior UPC leader at the time of the attack prior to becoming a political advisor to the government following the signing of the 2018 peace agreement and receiving political appointments. His case has raised significant concerns over challenging impunity and ensuring justice for the victims of gross human rights violations.

The International Criminal Court, meanwhile, has arrested two anti-Balaka leaders, whose cases are being processed in The Hague, and in January 2021, the first Seleka suspect was surrendered to the court.

These developments are significant steps towards realising justice. However, they do not adequately challenge the impunity that perpetrators of grave violations of human rights and international humanitarian law have enjoyed since the beginning of the December 2012 crisis.

Targeting of religious leaders and individuals involved in civilian peace initiatives

Concerns remain about the safety of religious leaders and other individuals involved in national reconciliation efforts and the Interfaith Peace Platform.

On 4 June 2021, the convoy of Apostle Nicolas Gurekoyame Gbangou, head of the Evangelical Union in CAR and a founding member of the Interfaith Peace Platform, was attacked by unknown gunmen. The convoy of approximately 300 Christians from the ELIM denomination was stopped near the village of Nzéléké in Basse-Kotto, 22 kilometres from Alindao, by armed men who ordered the passengers out of the vehicles and confiscated all their valuables, including mobile phones and money. They then set the vehicles alight, leaving the group stranded.

At a press conference on 9 June 2021, Apostle Gurekoyame Gbangou explained that the group, which included elderly and traumatised individuals, had to travel for one and a half hours to seek help. He called on the government to work towards freedom of movement of people and goods across all parts of the country. When asked why the men targeted a religious group, Apostle Gurekoyame Gbangou explained that one of the armed men had said “the Church shouldn’t play politics” and “instructed us to tell President Touadera that they still have the strength and can still harm.”

Humanitarian concerns

The Archbishop of Bangui, Cardinal Dieudonné Nzapalainga has warned that the security and humanitarian situation in the country continues to be of significant concern. Speaking after an eight-day pastoral visit to the north and northwest of

the country in December 2021, he noted that thousands had been displaced since 2012 and had lost everything, and that children who are aged nine years old have never known what it is to live in a house or sleep in a bed. Additionally, in Bouca the Muslim population was displaced in 2013. Some are now willing to consider returning to their homes, which means they will need support to build social cohesion in the city.

Recommendations

To the government of the Central African Republic:

- Engage in meaningful dialogues with political opposition and armed groups, ensuring the peace process is revitalised, and the safety of vulnerable citizens is prioritised.
- Work towards disarming and demobilising armed groups operating within the country in order to ensure the right to life and security of all citizens, and to prevent armed groups from restricting the right to FoRB.
- Ensure a thorough investigation of and accountability for the violations highlighted by the UN Working Group on Mercenaries.
- Ensure that individuals who have committed gross human rights violations during recent or previous conflicts are brought to justice, and are not appointed to political positions or the armed forces.
- Ensure that any allegations against individuals who hold political office are thoroughly investigated, and that the accused are suspended from their roles until the conclusion of any investigation or trial.
- Support peace and reconciliation projects that aim to rebuild trust between religious communities.
- Ensure that relevant provisions within the constitution reflect the right to freedom of religion or belief as set out in the ICCPR.

To the European Union and Member States:

- Maintain and look to expand sanctions on members and entities connected to the Wagner Group, under the EU global sanctions regime.
- Use GSP monitoring processes to apply pressure on CAR to uphold its human rights commitments, including FoRB. The EU’s withdrawal of EBA trade preferences for Cambodia in 2020 has set a significant precedent.

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