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## Crisis in the Central African Republic

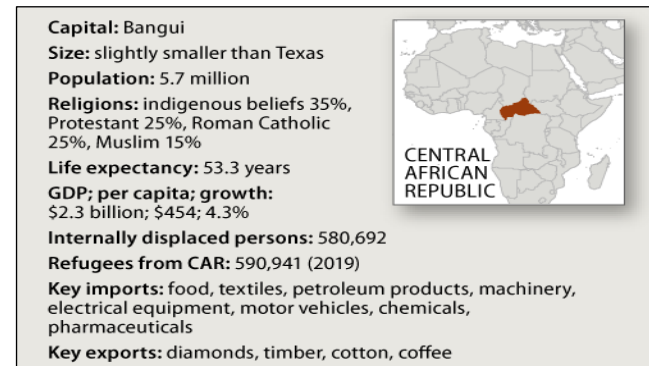
Congress has held hearings, appropriated aid funds, and conducted oversight in response to the situation in the Central African Republic (CAR), which has experienced state collapse and conflict since a rebel movement known as the Seleka seized control of the government in 2013. Despite a post-rebellion political transition culminating in the 2016 inauguration of a new president, Faustin Archange Touadera (a former Prime Minister who ran as an independent), security and humanitarian conditions have deteriorated. The European Union (EU), U.N., Russia, and the United States are providing support to the national military (the FACA), but state security forces remain weak and dogged by a history of abuses and militia infiltration. Competitions over mineral resources, cattle migration routes, and trade have been key drivers of conflict.

Armed groups control much of the country, despite donor-backed efforts to extend state authority. In February 2019, the government and 14 armed groups signed a peace accord brokered by the African Union (AU) in Khartoum, Sudan. The new agreement—the eighth since 2013—calls for a unity government, demobilization of non-state combatants, and the creation of interim mixed security units comprising security forces and former rebels. Several groups threatened immediately to withdraw from the accord, prompting questions over its durability and impact. Prospects for full implementation—which arguably would require that armed groups relinquish control of lucrative economic interests—are tenuous. Few drivers of grassroots-level conflict have been addressed.

Much of the violence in CAR has played out along ethnic and sectarian lines, driven by tensions over identity, citizenship, and exclusion. The Seleka was led by largely Muslim combatants with ties to CAR's remote northeast, and to neighboring Sudan and Chad, drawing support from communities that some in CAR view as foreign. Christian and animist-led “anti-balaka” (“anti-machete” or “anti-bullet”) militias formed to fight the Seleka, but ultimately targeted Muslims in general. CAR's population was about 15% Muslim and 85% Christian or animist, but anti-balaka attacks in 2013-2014 forced much of the Muslim population in the south, center, and west to gather in small enclaves or flee to other countries or the rebel-held northeast—a pattern U.N. investigators termed “ethnic cleansing.”

Rebel alliances have since shifted as groups have sought to gain leverage in peace talks and advance their economic interests. Some coalitions have bridged sectarian divides, underscoring the extent to which social cleavages have been instrumentalized during the conflict. Notably, some anti-balaka groups have collaborated with some ex-Seleka factions to target members of the (mostly Muslim and pastoralist) Fulani ethnic community. Several Fulani-led armed groups have emerged in response.

Figure 1. Central African Republic: At a Glance



Source: CRS graphic. Data from U.N. agencies, IMF, and CIA World Factbook; 2018 estimates unless otherwise noted.

### Humanitarian and Human Rights Conditions

As of late 2018, one in five Central Africans were displaced: 580,700 as internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 591,000 as refugees in neighboring countries. Over 275,000 CAR refugees reside in Cameroon, which has faced a rise in armed banditry along its border with CAR. About half of CAR's population, 2.9 million people, reportedly need humanitarian aid, with nearly 2 million facing severe food insecurity. CAR is among the world's deadliest countries for aid workers; militia attacks on IDPs have further impeded relief efforts.

The State Department's 2018 human rights report on CAR cites arbitrary killings, forced disappearances, sexual violence, harsh prison conditions, and impunity as key issues. A Special Criminal Court has been established to prosecute crimes since 2003, but it has been slow to launch. The International Criminal Court (ICC) has also opened investigations related to CAR, with the trial of two anti-balaka leaders due to open in mid-2019.

### The Economy

CAR's development indicators are among the lowest in the world: it ranked 188<sup>th</sup> out of 189 countries on the 2018 U.N. Human Development Index. The already fragile economy collapsed with the onset of violence in 2013 and the ensuing flight of much of the Muslim population, which had previously played a key role in trade nationwide. Economic growth has recovered moderately, averaging 4.5% per year from 2015 to 2018, but this rate is insufficient to alleviate poverty significantly, and displacement and conflict continue to hinder wellbeing. In 2015, legal diamond exports formally resumed from certain areas in the southwest deemed free of armed groups by the Kimberley Process, an international certification initiative aimed at preventing diamonds that fund rebel groups from entering legal trade. Most diamonds reportedly continue to

be exported illegally, however, including from ex-Seleka controlled areas in the north and east.

### U.N. Peacekeeping and Other Foreign Troops

The U.N. Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in CAR (MINUSCA) was established in 2014, absorbing a previous AU military force. MINUSCA is mandated to protect civilians, assist the peace process, protect aid delivery, support the extension of state authority, and, under certain conditions, take “urgent temporary measures...to arrest and detain in order to maintain basic law and order and fight impunity,” among other tasks. As of early 2019, MINUSCA had nearly reached its authorized deployment of 12,870 uniformed personnel, including 11,650 military troops. Force protection, logistical capacity, and adequate equipment remain key challenges. A sweeping sexual abuse scandal implicating MINUSCA contingents has also hurt relations with local populations.

As of late 2018, an EU Training Mission (EUTM) established in 2016 had trained more than 4,000 vetted FACA soldiers, out of a total pre-2013 force of about 7,000. The EU previously deployed some 750 soldiers to help secure Bangui in 2014-2015, and later established a military advisory mission to support reforms. France, which deployed some 2,000 troops to CAR from 2013 to 2016 to disarm militias and secure Bangui, has military personnel participating in the EUTM and MINUSCA.

The U.N. Security Council has maintained an arms embargo and targeted sanctions regime on CAR since 2013, but in recent years it has approved some arms transfers to the government on a case-by-case basis. CAR officials have called for the embargo to be fully lifted for the government. In late 2018, the Council authorized MINUSCA to provide logistical support for the FACA’s “progressive redeployment” through CAR’s territory. The mission had previously coordinated some operations with the FACA in Bangui and other cities where the military had established a presence. Although some communities have welcomed the military, the legacy of FACA disintegration and involvement in anti-Muslim violence in 2013-2015 may hinder its effectiveness. U.N. sanctions investigators criticized a botched 2018 joint operation by U.N., FACA, and CAR internal security forces in Bangui’s Muslim “PK5” enclave for worsening intercommunal tensions.

Russia’s growing presence in CAR has raised concerns for French and U.S. policymakers. The Commander of U.S. Africa Command testified to Congress in early 2019 that CAR was an example of Russia’s “more militaristic approach in Africa,” in which “oligarch-funded, quasi-mercenary military advisors” have secured mineral rights in exchange for weapons. Russia may also be seeking greater diplomatic influence in Africa at the expense of colonial power France. Russian military personnel and private contractors first deployed to assist the FACA in 2017, after Russia secured a U.N. arms embargo exemption to donate small arms. As of late 2018, U.N. sanctions monitors reported that FACA deployments outside Bangui were “most often accompanied” by Russian instructors. Russian personnel also have established a presence in mineral-rich rebel-held areas, and Russia pushed to locate the AU-backed peace talks in Sudan, where it has close ties (as do key Seleka figures). In 2018, three Russian investigative

journalists were killed in CAR in unclear circumstances while probing private military contractor activities.

### U.S. Policy and Aid

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“Our primary U.S. objective is to help the elected government of President Touadera expand state authority. We support the African Union-led peace process, efforts to bring justice to victims of atrocities, and reestablishment of civilian security and justice capabilities.” – U.S. Ambassador to CAR Lucy Tamlyn

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The United States is the single largest donor to the humanitarian response in CAR, allocating about \$124 million in emergency humanitarian aid per year in FY2017 and FY2018. Other U.S. assistance has sought to support conflict resolution and reconciliation, atrocity-prevention efforts, livelihoods, security sector reform, and environmental conservation. U.S. bilateral aid totaled \$34 million in FY2018, including \$18 million in food aid, \$13 million in security aid, and \$3 million in development aid. Starting in 2014, during CAR’s transitional government, U.S. security assistance initially centered on the police and justice sector. In 2016, it expanded to include military professionalization, right-sizing, and defense reform programs, along with efforts to encourage disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of rebel fighters.

The Trump Administration requested \$6.6 million in State- and USAID-administered bilateral aid funding for CAR in FY2020. The Administration backed an increase in MINUSCA’s troop ceiling in 2017, but has recently sought to limit U.S. funding for the mission, in line with its broader critique of U.N. peacekeeping. U.S. financial contributions to MINUSCA totaled \$267 million in FY2018, with \$157 million and \$163 million requested for FY2019 and FY2020, respectively.

The Administration has expanded U.S. targeted sanctions to deter support to CAR’s domestic armed groups and the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), which originated in Uganda and is active in CAR. Sixteen individuals and three entities are designated for U.S. sanctions under Executive Order 13667 (2014) on CAR, including former presidents François Bozizé and Michel Djotodia, ex-Seleka leader Nouredine Adam, LRA leader Joseph Kony, two of his sons, and the LRA as a group. The U.S. designations are more extensive than those imposed by the U.N. Security Council sanctions committee on CAR. In 2017, the Administration withdrew U.S. military advisors who had supported Ugandan-led counter-LRA operations in eastern CAR since 2011.

Congress has directed the executive branch to issue a strategy toward CAR (S.Rept. 113-195); in 2015, the State Department submitted a strategy document that defined U.S. interests and outlined U.S. diplomatic and aid efforts in CAR. Congress also has directed funding for reconciliation and peacebuilding aid in CAR, and for DDR and early-warning programs in LRA-affected areas, via annual foreign aid appropriations measures (most recently, under §7042 of P.L. 116-6). The conference agreement on P.L. 116-6 includes \$8 million in military aid for CAR via the State Department’s Peacekeeping Operations account.

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