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Crisis in the Central African Republic

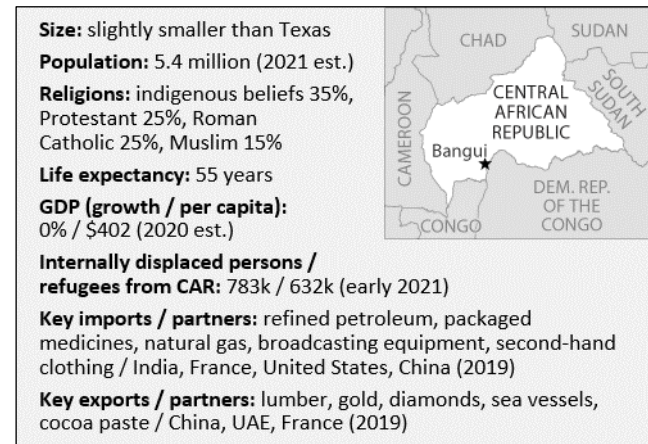
The Central African Republic (CAR) remains beset by violence and humanitarian suffering despite international stabilization efforts, two national elections, and multiple peace processes over the past decade. Growing Russian involvement in CAR’s defense and mining sectors has raised U.S. policy concerns as a potential model for Russian penetration in Africa. U.N. agencies reported in mid-2021 that 2.8 million people in CAR (over 50%) required humanitarian assistance and over 700,000 were internally displaced, while nearly 700,000 more were refugees in nearby countries. These figures have increased in recent months. The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has brought new health and economic challenges, though CAR has identified (and tested) fewer cases than many other countries.

President Faustin Archange Touadéra was reelected to a second, five-year term in December 2020. He has since overseen a rapid offensive in which the national military (known as the FACA), backed by Russian security contractors, has reclaimed parts of central, eastern, and northern CAR for the first time since 2013, when northern rebel groups temporarily captured the capital, Bangui. This represents a seismic shift after years in which the central state and FACA had a minimal presence outside Bangui and a few areas in the west and south. In question is whether military gains are sustainable and likely to result in greater security for beleaguered local populations. U.N. officials have accused FACA and Russian personnel of abusing civilians and harassing U.N. staff. Armed groups reportedly retain a presence in rural areas along with some control over lucrative economic interests, such as mines and routes used for trade and cattle herding.

President Touadéra launched the offensive after rebel groups formed a new alliance known as the “Coalition of Patriots for Change” (CPC) and laid siege to Bangui, cutting off key supply routes and threatening to attack the city. Spearheaded by deposed former President François Bozizé, the CPC included several armed factions that had signed CAR’s latest peace accord, the 2019 African Union (AU)-brokered Khartoum Agreement. Underscoring the shifting and opportunistic dynamics of recent conflicts in CAR, several CPC faction leaders participated in the 2012-2013 rebellion that ousted Bozizé from office.

The CPC emerged during election preparations in late 2020, during which CAR’s constitutional court barred Bozizé from running, citing U.N. sanctions and a CAR arrest warrant. Violence, alleged irregularities, and low turnout marred the election; opposition parties objected to results and withdrew from run-off legislative polls in 2021. President Touadéra has pledged dialogue with rebels and political opponents, with few concrete results. Past peace talks have granted amnesty and state posts to belligerents, arguably incentivizing CAR’s cyclical conflicts.

Figure 1. CAR at a Glance



Source: CRS graphic. Data from CIA World Factbook, IMF.

Background and Context

CAR has experienced several conflicts since the 1990s. In 2013, a rebel movement known as the Seleka (“coalition”) ousted then-President Bozizé, who had seized power by force a decade earlier. A chaotic period of state collapse ensued. Widespread violence against and among civilians often played out along ethnic and sectarian identity lines. CAR’s population was reportedly about 85% Christian or animist and 15% Muslim at the time; the Seleka was led by Muslim combatants from the northeast with ties to Sudan and Chad and drew support from local communities often portrayed by others in CAR as foreign and thus illegitimate. Aided by Bozizé, Christian- and animist-led “anti-balaka” (“anti-machete” or “anti-bullet”) militias formed to fight the Seleka and ultimately targeted Muslims in general. Anti-balaka attacks in 2013-2014 forced much of the Muslim population either to shelter in precarious enclaves or flee, a pattern that U.N. experts deemed “ethnic cleansing.”

The establishment of a U.N. peacekeeping operation in 2014 and subsequent elections led to the inauguration of President Touadéra, a mathematician and former prime minister under Bozizé, in 2016. These steps helped stabilize the central government in Bangui; elsewhere in the country, ex-Seleka and anti-balaka factions continued to target civilians and each other. U.N. peacekeepers, the European Union, Russia, and the United States have provided support to the FACA, but state security forces generally remain weak and dogged by a history of abuses and militia infiltration. Competition over mineral resources, cattle migration routes, and trade has fueled the conflict.

The 2019 Khartoum Agreement mandates a unity government, political decentralization, and mixed security units comprising state security forces and former rebels. Implementation has been uneven at best. Rebel alliances have repeatedly shifted as groups seek to gain leverage in

talks and advance their economic interests. Few if any drivers of grassroots-level conflict have been addressed.

The U.N. Security Council has maintained an arms embargo and sanctions regime since 2013 but has loosened constraints on arms transfers to the government in recent years. CAR officials have called for the embargo to be fully lifted. Since 2018, the Council has authorized U.N. peacekeepers to provide logistical support for the FACA's "progressive redeployment" through CAR's territory.

The State Department's 2020 human rights report on CAR cites extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, and torture by state security forces; "life-threatening" prison conditions; use of child soldiers; and other serious abuses—along with a "climate of impunity." A Special Criminal Court (SCC) staffed by local and international experts is tasked with prosecuting serious crimes, but cases have been slow to progress. The International Criminal Court also has initiated several prosecutions related to CAR in recent years.

U.N. Peacekeeping Operation

The U.N. Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in CAR (MINUSCA) is mandated to protect civilians, assist the peace process, protect aid delivery, support the extension of state authority, and, under certain conditions, "to arrest and detain in order to maintain basic law and order and fight impunity," among other tasks. In early 2021, the U.N. Security Council increased its authorized military troop ceiling by 2,750 (to 14,400 total) and its police component by 940 (to 3,020). (The U.S. vote in favor required prior notification to Congress.) Force protection, logistical capacity, and adequate equipment remain key challenges. Repeated sexual abuse and exploitation scandals also have likely harmed the mission's relations with local communities. MINUSCA's mandate is up for renewal in November 2021.

Russian Presence

Russia's involvement in CAR appears to have both financial and geostrategic motivations. The Commander of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) testified to Congress in early 2021 that, "Russia is testing its playbook for malign activity" in CAR, "where they are employing PMCs [private military contractors], extracting minerals, and buying influence." Russian military "instructors" first deployed to CAR in 2017 after securing an exemption under the U.N. arms embargo. Most are reportedly PMCs employed by the U.S.-sanctioned Wagner Group and other firms. In mid-2021, media reports indicated that the number of Russian personnel had ballooned to 2,300 from the initial 175 reported by U.N. sanctions monitors on CAR.

In addition to military trainers and advisors, Russian nationals reportedly serve in President Touadéra's security detail, as his national security advisor, and as advisors to the national customs service. Russian mining firms are also active in the country. In March 2021, U.N. human rights experts expressed alarm at apparent coordination between foreign PMCs and some U.N. peacekeepers in CAR. Three Russian investigative journalists were killed in CAR in 2018 while probing Russian PMC activities.

Russia's growing weight, bolstered by apparent disinformation campaigns, particularly threatens the interests of former colonial power France, long a key player

in CAR. In June 2021, France announced it would suspend its military cooperation and some budget support for CAR due to concerns about Russian influence and other factors.

Economy

CAR ranked 188th out of 189 countries (worst) on the 2020 U.N. Human Development Index. Agriculture, forestry, and mining are core economic sectors. The economy collapsed with the onset of violence in 2013 and subsequent flight of much of the Muslim population, whose members had played a prominent role in markets and trade. Growth recovered after a transitional government was established in 2014, but not enough to alleviate poverty, while displacement and ongoing violence continued to hinder wellbeing. The International Monetary Fund estimates that growth was flat in 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Legal diamond exports formally resumed in 2015 from areas in the southwest designated by the Kimberley Process, an international initiative aimed at preventing diamonds that may finance rebel groups from entering global trade. Diamonds reportedly continue to be exported illicitly from other areas, including those controlled by armed groups in the northeast. Gold and other resources are also reported sources of armed group financing.

U.S. Policy and Aid

According to the State Department, U.S. policy toward CAR seeks to improve stability and security, promote economic growth and development, and strengthen institutions. U.S. officials have also signaled growing concerns with Russian influence. The United States is the top country donor of humanitarian aid for CAR, allocating \$177 million in FY2020 and \$60 million in FY2021 to date. The United States also is the largest contributor to MINUSCA's budget (as with all U.N. peacekeeping operations), allocating \$281 million in FY2020.

Separate U.S. bilateral foreign aid for CAR totaled \$21 million in FY2020 appropriations, of which more than half was for security assistance (primarily for military capacity-building and security sector reform). The Biden Administration has requested \$14 million for CAR in FY2022, proposing to reduce some military and rule-of-law aid. Via recent foreign aid appropriations measures, Congress has directed aid funds to support the SCC, the FACA, and disarmament and early-warning initiatives in areas affected by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a small Ugandan-origin armed group responsible for atrocities in the region. U.S. aid programs have also supported atrocity prevention and conflict mitigation, economic livelihoods, and environmental conservation.

The United States has imposed sanctions on 17 individuals and three entities under Executive Order 13667 (2014) pertaining to CAR, including former presidents Bozizé and Michel Djotodia, rebel commander Nouredine Adam, anti-balaka coordinator Eugène Ngaïkosset, and the LRA and its leader Joseph Kony. U.S. designations are more extensive than those imposed by the U.N. sanctions committee on CAR. The Trump Administration made additional CAR-linked designations under executive orders tied to Russia.

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