

### The Persecution of Muslims in the Central African Republic

As the civil violence worsens in the Central African Republic (CAR) Muslim civilians are being forced to flee their homes in the face of brutal violence from anti-balaka (anti-machete) fighters. Muslims make up around 15% of the CAR population and it is estimated hundreds have been killed and thousands have been displaced.

#### Civil War and Retaliatory Violence

- Since the 2013 coup by the **Seleka** rebel coalition, the CAR has descended into a brutal civil war – an estimated 25% of its 4.6 million population has been forced to flee the country.<sup>1</sup>
- The Seleka is comprised of mostly Muslims militants from the northeast, as well as from Chad and Sudan. The rebel group is accused by human rights organisations of committing massacres across the country, including torture, the recruitment of child soldiers and the murder of civilians.
- In response, a group of predominantly Christian militants, known as the **anti-balaka**, have emerged to fight the Seleka. With the Seleka in decline, the tide of violence has now turned and the anti-balaka fighters are accused of committing similar atrocities against Muslim civilians.
- The Seleka ceded power in January 2014 and a new president, **Catherine Samba-Panza**, has been elected. The African Union and France have both sent 7,100 peacekeeping forces to the country.<sup>2</sup> But, despite these measures, the violence has continued to escalate.
- At least 2000 people have been killed in CAR since December 2013 and over 900,000 are believed to have fled their homes and are now both externally and internally displaced.<sup>3</sup>

#### Violence Against Muslim Civilians

- Thousands of Muslim civilians have fled to neighbouring **Chad, Cameroon** and the **Democratic Republic of Congo**.
- Anti-balaka fighters have subjected those who have remained to repeated attacks. On March 22, 2014, at least 8 Muslim civilians were killed by an attack on the capital of **Bangui**.<sup>4</sup>
- Tensions run high in the country, especially in Bangui, where anti-balaka fighters are seeking revenge for the atrocities committed by the Seleka through the torture, lynching and murder of Muslim civilians. Reports detail incidents of communities and former friends turning on each other, fuelled by sectarian hatred.<sup>5</sup>

*“They were [once] like my cousins. They said I was a spy, that I wanted to kill Christians” – a young Muslim describing an attack by his former basketball teammates (Human Rights Watch, 2014).*

*“To protect the country’s remaining Muslim communities; international peacekeeping forces must break the control of anti-balaka militias and station sufficient troops in towns where Muslims are threatened” (Amnesty International, 2014).*

- Muslim residents are trapped in temporary displacement camps and residential areas, mostly within the capital of Bangui, unable to leave because of the violence but at the same time, still exposed to attacks from anti-balaka fighters.
- Fatou Bensouda, chief prosecutor at the International Criminal Court, has already opened an investigation into alleged crimes against humanity mentioned by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay.<sup>6</sup>

- There is concern that displaced Muslims from the CAR could face further neglect and marginalisation in the countries in which they have found refuge. This leads to fears that extremist jihadist groups in the region could recruit these displaced and disillusioned Muslims.<sup>7</sup>

#### International Attention and Action

- Recent developments are expected to allow for a European Union peacekeeping force to join African Union and French peacekeeping forces already on the ground. However, the EU has been criticised for its delayed response.<sup>8</sup> UN General Secretary Ban Ki-Moon has also pledged to do “everything possible” to help the international response.<sup>9</sup>
- Some commentators have accused the world of being more focused on the current situation in Ukraine and, therefore, neglecting to give the crisis in CAR the attention it requires.
- The conflict has created a climate of brutal retaliatory ethnic-religious violence, with both Christians and Muslims seeking revenge on the other community for atrocities committed against their own. Unless drastic action is taken to interrupt this self-perpetuating cycle of violence and retaliation, the CAR will continue to be subject to the ceaseless escalation of bloody civil war.

## References

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