

Conflict, instability and hunger: breaking the cycle in the Central African Republic

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Key messages

The humanitarian and protection situation for civilians in the Central African Republic (CAR) is deteriorating due to the changing nature of the conflict there. Humanitarian access is hampered and there is a risk of a return to inter-communal violence similar to 2012-2013.

The dire food security situation requires urgent action. Donors - with both humanitarian and development funding - and food security partners should invest in early and anticipatory action to enhance food security, including through ensuring production of and access to food, and support to rebuild livelihoods with seeds and tools distribution.

There are signs that hunger is being used as a weapon of war in CAR, as seen with the blockade of Bangui in late 2020 and early 2021. Aid actors have been unable to address food insecurity and protection due to denial of access by parties to the conflict. Diplomatic actors should consider activating United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 2417 to address the situation in CAR.

CAR is not on the international community's radar nor at the forefront of media or political agendas, meaning it lacks dedicated financial resources and political capital. Ensuring that CAR becomes a priority in diplomatic, political and humanitarian agendas of governments with dedicated capacities in relevant embassies is critical to stopping the cycle of conflict, violence and hunger.

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Introduction

Since the presidential elections in December 2020, the situation in the Central African Republic (CAR) has worsened with increased political instability, new conflict dynamics and continued humanitarian implications for civilians. It is estimated that in 2021, 2.8 million Central Africans (57% of the population) will require assistance and protection.

The Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at ODI hosted a closed-door online roundtable under the Chatham House Rule on 16 June to discuss the following questions:

- How can humanitarian engagement and diplomacy contribute to addressing the root causes of hunger and instability in CAR, including through implementing Security Council Resolution 2417?
- In what ways can different actors contribute to addressing access challenges, the targeting of humanitarian actors, the impact of insecurity and armed groups' use of hunger as a weapon of war, to contribute to ending the cycle of conflict, instability and hunger in CAR?
- What are the opportunities for collective action, and from whom, to end this vicious cycle?

The closed-door online roundtable brought together some key government stakeholders from the UK, North America and Europe, as well as humanitarian, human rights and peace actors and researchers to discuss ways and opportunities to end the vicious cycle of violence in CAR. This note summarises the key discussion points from this roundtable.¹

Changing and worsening conflict dynamics with humanitarian implications

New actors, new conflict, new tactics

The conflict in CAR is changing: new actors, the changing nature of warfare and new tactics are increasing the complexity of the crisis and its humanitarian and protection implications for civilians. A critical development is the changing role of the government, which has become an active party to the conflict. Since 2014, the government had been largely a bystander and lacked the means to enact its ambitions to assert its authority throughout the country. Instead, various armed groups fought against one another in their respective bids to consolidate or expand territory under their control. However, since December 2020, with Russia and Rwanda by its side within the framework of bilateral military agreements, the government and the Forces Armées

¹ This note does not represent the views or policies of the participants to the 16 June roundtable. It reflects the diverse views expressed by some participations during the roundtable.

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Centrafricaines (FACA) have become directly engaged in the fighting across the country. FACA and the government's new active role in the conflict is creating tensions with certain sectors of the population. Some anticipate the conflict in CAR returning to the 2012–2013 dynamics characterised by inter-communal violence.

Concerns that the conflict could become protracted are increasing for two main reasons. First, the government has no incentive to engage in regional dialogue and pursue a peaceful resolution of the crisis, given the military support from Russia. Indeed, the Touadera government was seen by one participant as unwilling to seek a political solution. Second, the conflict has taken on stereotypical features of an asymmetric war. New hit and run tactics are being used as seen in Bozoum, Bambari, Alindao and Ippy. Such tactics could be sustained over a long period.

The changing nature of the conflict has negative humanitarian implications. The use of explosive ordnance – including improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and anti-personnel and anti-tank mines – is increasing the economic cost of the crisis and rendering large parts of the territory inaccessible. There is also no oversight of the warring parties' conduct and thus no monitoring of violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) in contaminated parts of the country – in these areas it is becoming a war behind closed doors. Inaccessibility is affecting humanitarian operations as well as civilian life, particularly with regards to livelihoods.

There are also signs that hunger is being used as a weapon of war in CAR. At the very least, parties to the conflict are willing to use hunger as a military strategy as seen in the recent blockade of Bangui by armed groups. Food insecurity is seen as fuelling the rebellion, as the population becomes increasingly disgruntled. All of this has led to increased violations of IHL; allegations include the pillage of civilian homes and property, sexual violence, the killing of livestock and summary executions committed by all conflict parties. Such actions are further deteriorating food security in the country, aggravating existing frustrations within communities and instilling resentment, fear and a sense of insecurity.

Finally, there are some fears that the current conflict could become internationalised, especially if relations with Chad continue to worsen.

Inter-communal tensions and deteriorating relationship between government and civilians

Misinformation and disinformation online and in person have fuelled hate speech and ethnic tensions (such tensions were seen to be more along ethnic rather than religious lines). Hate speech towards the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) and specific communities seems to be on the increase, some of which is allegedly fuelled by the government and its Russian ally. Much of the hate speech, misinformation and rumours are circulating through closed WhatsApp groups rather than on Twitter, Facebook or the media, making rumour tracking and management extremely difficult.

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It is not always clear to what extent inter-communal tensions are exacerbated by national politics or higher-level geopolitical issues, such as the rivalry between France and Russia in CAR. One roundtable participant noted the increased visibility in Bangui of Russian public communication advertising its support for FACA. Another participant highlighted how Russian promotion of its military support to the government and the active role of FACA in the conflict had created a renewed sense of nationalism in Bangui. To counter this, public information efforts from France were also reportedly on the increase. The lack of voices from civil society is further facilitating this propaganda, highlighting the need for a multistakeholder approach to rumour management through media, civil society and across the board.

If not checked, current dynamics raise the risk of a return to inter-communal violence similar to 2012–2013. Reprisals from government armed forces against certain marginalised groups are fuelling support for armed groups and increasing inter-communal tensions. For instance, there is a growing perception in Muslim communities that they are being disenfranchised as part of stabilisation efforts. Although FACA and their Russian partners were initially welcomed as liberators, they are now perceived as a threat by some sectors of the Muslim community. The Presidential appointment of El Hadj Moussa Laurent Ngon Baba as Mediator for the Republic – a former President of the General Assembly and highly respected Muslim statesman – is a positive development as he could play a key role in restoring the Muslim community's confidence in the government.

Increasing scale of needs and protection threats

The changing and worsening dynamics of conflict in CAR mean that humanitarian needs continue to increase and violations of IHL and International human rights law (IHRL) are becoming more prevalent, thereby discouraging the return of refugees and internally displaced people. According to current projections, 57% of CAR's population will be in need of humanitarian assistance and protection in 2021, and nearly half of the population will suffer from food insecurity by the end of the year. Meanwhile, 40% of the total population are experiencing severe acute malnutrition. Worryingly, the food security situation in CAR was already dire, even before the traditionally lean rainy season.

Access challenges and complex operational environment

CAR's operational environment is complicated. Humanitarian space is decreasing as both government and non-state armed group actors are complicating access for humanitarian organisations. Equally, the behaviour of parties to the conflict is hampering civilians' ability to access their livelihoods, which will reduce productivity and increase food insecurity. Furthermore, it is feared that civilians' access to fields is being impeded by the use of explosive ordnance such as IEDs. There are major concerns regarding the possible denial of safe and unimpeded access to those supplying relief to conflict-induced food insecurity in violation of Security Council Resolution 2417 (on conflict and hunger). All of this further threatens food security.

Challenges, opportunities and recommendations for a way forward

Challenges and questions

- **Lack of dedicated financial resources and political capital:** CAR is not on the international community's radar, nor at the forefront of media or political agendas. A chronic lack of funding forces humanitarian actors in CAR to focus on the most vulnerable. Development and longer-term assistance is almost nonexistent, preventing investment in infrastructure and sustainable solutions. One participant wondered how CAR could become a diplomatic priority for key governments, not only in terms of funding but also of political and diplomatic focus. Another participant highlighted the difficulty of maintaining focus on CAR in light of competing demands in Yemen, South Sudan, the Sahel and Nigeria, Covid-19 and reduced donor budgets – despite having close contacts and collaboration with donors. However, another participant noted that funding for CAR within their aid budget had been safeguarded despite ongoing constraints and competing demands for other crises. The same participant also highlighted that placing CAR on the political agenda is a real challenge in their government.
- **Managing tensions within MINUSCA's mandates:** As its direct engagement in the fighting increasingly exposes FACA as a potential source of violations towards civilians, MINUSCA struggles with its Security Council mandate. This mandate requires MINUSCA's deployment alongside FACA. MINUSCA's role in accompanying FACA in its efforts to respect and ensure respect of IHL is key. However, according to one participant, MINUSCA must ensure it does not undermine or deprioritise its protection of civilians objectives. MINUSCA's association with FACA can become challenging when FACA, supported by other forces, reacts disproportionately to attacks from armed groups as seen recently in Bambari. How long and how far will MINUSCA be able to manage the tension between its role in support of FACA and its protection of civilians mandate?
- **Collaboration with government:** A question was raised as to the possible risk of donor countries working too closely with the Touadera government, given the current dynamics of the conflict and deteriorating relationships between the government and certain sectors of the civilian population. Could donors' close collaboration with the CAR government on a stabilisation agenda in CAR potentially backfire and contribute to further alienating civilians?
- **Minimum standard to operate in the country:** Given the new dynamics of the conflict, worsening access for humanitarians and a government seemingly reluctant to seek a peaceful political solution with the opposition, what are the minimum standards for humanitarians and peacebuilding actors to continue operating in CAR?

Opportunities

- **Coordinated and effective Humanitarian Country Team:** One opportunity to capitalise on is the effective leadership of the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC). Some participants highlighted that the HC leadership enabled enhanced collaboration, mutual reinforcement and complementarity across actors present in CAR, which has led to strong humanitarian impact.
- **Role of development actors:** Development actors and international financial institutions seem to be willing to engage more in CAR despite the lack of promising outcomes of investments thus far. Such actors could be critical in putting pressure on the government to fully take on its responsibility to strengthen the rule of law, fight impunity and seek a peaceful resolution to the crisis. This could create the right incentives; currently the government seems unwilling to seek a peaceful resolution of the crisis, whether this is a return to the Khartoum Accord or a new political process. How can humanitarian, human rights and peacebuilding actors engage with development and international financial institutions to collectively provide the right incentives and path towards peace in CAR?
- **UN Security Council Resolution 2417 to address access and hunger in conflict:** One participant highlighted that diplomatic actors should consider how to make use of UN Security Council Resolution 2417 to raise awareness of the situation in CAR, as well as work with the Friends of the Resolution and the co-chairs, namely the UK and the Dominican Republic.

Recommendations

- **Ensure that CAR becomes a priority in governments' diplomatic, political and humanitarian agendas.** Appeal within your governments to put CAR at the heart of political and diplomatic concerns. Help ensure that humanitarian appeals are well funded, making the most of the opportunity offered by the effective humanitarian coordination in place in CAR. Ensure that there is appropriate diplomatic attention and capacity in respective embassies supporting CAR.
- **Invest in early and anticipatory action to enhance food security,** including through ensuring production of and access to food, and support to rebuild livelihoods with seeds and tools distribution. This will require both humanitarian and development funding.
- **Seek to activate UN Security Council Resolution 2417 with regards to the situation in CAR.** This would require raising the agenda with the African Union and elevating the CAR situation in the UN Security Council. Learn from the recent attempt by the Republic of Ireland to use UN Security Council resolution 2417 with regards to Tigray to inform a collective effort to use the mechanism to prevent further deterioration of humanitarian space, access and principles and food security in CAR. Engage with the Friends of the Resolution to seek action on CAR.
- **Call on all parties to the conflict to respect IHL,** particularly regarding their responsibility to ensure food security and prevent famine. This also includes their legal obligation to protect crops and livestock and to eliminate the use of weapons with indiscriminate effects such as

IEDs and anti-personnel mines (as well as their obligation to identify, remove and destroy such weapons, in accordance with customary law). Donors should support the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) to work with the CAR government on their obligations under the Ottawa Convention, while also assisting Geneva Call to engage with non-state armed groups through their deed of commitment on landmines.

- **Support MINUSCA in its protection of civilians mandate and Resolution 2552.** This role includes accompanying the deployment of Central African security forces, which can be optimised for mentoring purposes to ensure respect for IHL and IHRL.
- **Support the Touadera government to uphold its commitment to strengthen the rule of law and fight impunity,** including through supporting the newly established government commission to investigate violations of IHL and IHRL. The newly elected government needs to take full responsibility for protecting civilians and supporting their food security. The CAR government and its allies should be transparent on the various national and international forces deployed in the country, the terms of their deployment and rules of engagement. The international community must support the government in these efforts to ensure the protection and well-being of the civilian population. This should also include supporting the efforts of the newly appointed Mediator for the Republic of CAR (El Hadj Moussa Laurent Ngon Baba) in his efforts to defuse tensions and cultivate peace and reconciliation among different sectors of the population (including the Government of CAR).
- **Support stabilisation and further development efforts.** The international community must invest in stabilisation efforts in unstable areas that experience or are at risk of armed conflict, with a focus on IHL and IHRL. Concurrently, ensure the right development assistance is provided in areas such as Bangui, which have stabilised but require further support and a different type of assistance to move beyond stabilisation, short-term humanitarian aid and security based on the peacekeeping mission. Finally, emergency response must be scaled up while continuing to support development and good governance programmes in stable parts of the country.
- **Improve conflict sensitivity in humanitarian programming.** Donors, the Humanitarian Country Team and humanitarian organisations should invest in a conflict sensitivity hub in CAR and ensure greater support for the social cohesion working group as part of the protection cluster to maintain dedicated conflict analysis capacity across sectors and actors. This would enable iterative conflict scan analysis at multiple levels, including the project site level, and take into account the fluidity and location-specific dynamics of conflict and intersections with aid.
- **Monitor, regulate and manage misinformation, disinformation and hate speech.** A concerted effort is needed with social media platforms, media outlets, peacebuilding actors and government to stop misinformation and disinformation from exacerbating conflict dynamics and inter-communal tensions. Investing in more systematic rumour tracking programmes and mechanisms that expose, challenge and manage propaganda is required.



The Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) is one of the world's leading teams of independent researchers and communications professionals working on humanitarian issues. It is dedicated to improving humanitarian policy and practice through a combination of high-quality analysis, dialogue and debate.

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