



[HRW.org](http://hrw.org)

**Testimony of Philippe Boloïon
United Nations Director, Human Rights Watch
Crisis in the Central African Republic
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health,
Global Human Rights, and International Organizations
November 19, 2013**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Bass, thank you for inviting me to testify today. I am so pleased that this subcommittee is turning its attention to the Central African Republic – a country that often gets little attention but is at a point of crisis that demands urgent and immediate engagement by the international community – and the United States.

I came back from the Central African Republic, a landlocked and deeply impoverished country in central Africa, less than two weeks ago. I spent a week in the country on a mission for Human Rights Watch, an international human rights organization.

I arrived in the capital, Bangui, carrying piles of our latest report. It is 79 pages long, and a brutal read. It covers the period from March to June of this year and details the killing of scores of civilians, including women and children, by members of the Seleka rebels, now in power. It also documents the destruction of entire villages.

As bad as I knew the situation was, it did not prepare me for what we found on the ground. We spent several days in Bossangoa, a town of 40,000 inhabitants, 300 kilometers north of Bangui. At the entrance to the town, we found a checkpoint manned by young former Seleka fighters. They were wearing flip-flops, random uniforms, and were carrying old weapons – all trademarks of the now nominally disbanded force.

Yet they rule the town, or what is left of it. Close to 40,000 people are living around the church in one of the worst ad-hoc displaced persons camps I have seen. It reeks of human waste and is filled

with bitter smoke and dust. Only a handful of non-governmental organizations and UN agencies provide help.

Many of these people have houses still standing, only a few hundred yards away. They were not displaced by a natural catastrophe, but by fear. They told us that whenever they venture out of the camp, Seleka fighters shoot at them.

Resident after resident told me of losing loved ones to Seleka bullets in their fields or houses. I met Florence Namngafo, a woman roughly my age, carrying a baby with a nasty wound. Her husband was killed by the same Seleka bullet that almost took her baby's arm. She survived by playing dead for hours, unable to assist her infant, who was screaming in pain.

A few hundred yards away, around 4,000 displaced Muslims residents are living in the long-since-closed school and court building. They fled attacks not by the Seleka, which is predominantly Muslim, but by mostly Christian armed groups commonly referred to as "anti-balaka," which means anti-machete. These local groups were activated in reaction to months of ruthless Seleka abuses.

While these mostly Christian armed groups define their purpose as self-defense against Seleka abuses, they have themselves often espoused radical anti-Muslim rhetoric and carried out deadly attacks against Muslim civilians. Such attacks have sometimes been carried out in coordination with better-armed former army elements that remain loyal to former President François Bozizé and seek his return to power.

According to the stories I heard, the anti-balaka groups can be as cruel and abusive as the enemy they purport to defend themselves against.

Massadou Bichefou, an older man with a damaged eye, told me how anti-balaka fighters came to his house at 5 a.m. on a day in early September. He is from a Peuhl community, Muslim nomadic cattle herders. Some of the fighters were dressed in civilian clothing with primitive weapons, he said, while others were in uniform, carrying AK47 rifles. He was able to escape in the dense bush but says he saw the aggressors bring each and every one of his 11 children and grandchildren to a man with a knife, who slit their throats, one by one. The youngest was 8 months old. His two wives met the same fate. He held his tears as he spelled the name and age of every lost one. Some of the attackers, he said, were former neighbors.

Other Peuhl people described how their village was attacked a month ago, also at 5 a.m., by a similar group of anti-balaka who arrived announcing that they wanted to "exterminate all the Muslims." They separated the men and older boys from the women and the other children. Seydou Hiroyi, who survived, told me that he saw anti-balaka men slit the throat of his 27-year-old brother.

When he and the other men fled in panic, the militiamen opened fire, killing three more people, including a 13-year-old boy.

Seydou and a few other men came back at night. All they found were footprints suggesting the women and children had left with the anti-balaka. He is convinced they are all dead. The houses had been looted and burned, and the cattle killed, with only the heads of the animals left on the ground.

Many people we talked to described the conflict in sectarian terms, with Muslims attacking Christians, and Christians attacking Muslims. This was something we had never heard before during research trips to the Central African Republic. It is particularly worrying in a country where both communities have always lived well together, and where the crisis had little to do with religion to begin with. But for months, even though they didn't always spare Muslim communities, Seleka fighters, who are in overwhelming numbers Muslims, targeted Christian communities with particular viciousness, often looting and destroying churches. This did not go over well with the large Christian majority in the country. Today, those carrying the guns on both sides and committing abuses on defenseless civilians seem eager to exploit religious tensions to their advantage. Though they rarely face off, they attack each other's perceived communities with abandon.

What this could do to the Central African Republic is extremely worrying, but hard to predict. To get an idea, we ventured out of the relative safety of Bossangoa to a village called Zéré, down the road to the east. During the few hours we drove on a dirt road, we never saw another vehicle, nor a Seleka fighter. Yet all the villages along the road are deserted. And the few women we encountered on the way ran into the bush in fear for their lives at the sound of our vehicle, dropping all their belongings on the road.

Zéré is now an eerie ghost town. The cycle of Seleka attacks on Christians, anti-balaka attacks against Muslims, followed by Seleka reprisals, have left the town in ruins. The church was charred, the Mosque destroyed and the chief of the Muslim neighborhood killed. We counted 300 burned houses. The school and health center have been completely looted. We talked to a few men who eventually came out of the bush carrying spears, machetes and knives. They live with their families a few kilometers back in the jungle. They told us of their children dying of Malaria and their wives giving birth under trees. No one is helping these people, mainly because of the lack of security and the difficulty reaching them. They told us about the Seleka attacks but claimed to be unaware of what had happened to their Muslim neighbors.

Back in Bangui, I met with the country's interim president, and former Seleka leader, Michel Djotodia. He received me not in the Presidential palace, but in a military camp on a hill in Bangui, in a blacked-out office with omnipresent security cameras. He was open and claimed that he was trying to bring some abusive ex-Seleka commanders under control. But he also tried to downplay the abuses Seleka forces have been responsible for, and at times seemed out of touch with the

dangers facing his country.

I also met with the security minister, Pastor Josué Binoua, formerly loyal to Bozizé, the ousted president. He told me that he only had 110 weapons for the 4,500 gendarmes and 1,400 policemen under his command.

I sat down with one of the former Seleka strongmen, and now head of intelligence, Nouredine Adam, who has been accused by Reporters Without Borders, a press freedom organization, of threatening journalists. He too downplayed the abuses described in many harrowing details in our report.

I was left with the impression that no one is really at the helm, and that the country could easily spin out of control.

The religious leaders I met at the national level seemed to be the only ones struggling to keep the country together. The archbishop of Bangui, Dieudonné Nzapalainga, and Imam Omar Kobine Layama are both fully aware of the danger created by sectarian tensions. Both work together to condemn, at great risk to their safety, the abuses committed against civilians of all sides. But they do not control the men with the guns.

So what could be done to prevent the country from spiraling into chaos, with untold numbers of lives claimed in the process?

For now, the international community has placed all its chips on an ill-equipped and ill-trained African peacekeeping mission of 2,500 troops called MICOPAX, initially deployed as a sub-regional force by the Economic Community of Central African States. On December 19, it is supposed to transfer its authority to MISCA, an African Union-led force relying on many of the same countries to supply troops, with a planned strength of 3,652.

Without these peacekeepers, the country would probably be in complete anarchy. Only their presence brought back a measure of security in Bangui, or, for example, in the displaced camps of Bossangoa.

But they are not up to the task. In Bangui they rarely patrol the streets and supplement their income by providing private security to businesses and rich individuals. In Bossangoa they sell beer and get pushed around by the Seleka whenever they try to venture outside of the town.

We believe that they should be urgently reinforced by a UN peacekeeping mission of the type that has been successfully deployed in Ivory Coast or Liberia. A few thousand professional and well-equipped blue helmets could deploy throughout the country, in places like Bossangoa or Zéré. With

a strong mandate to protect civilians, they would keep the armed men in check, and provide enough security that people could leave the camps and the bush and come back to their villages. They could start rebuilding their houses, cultivating their fields, tend to their cattle, and learn to live together again.

The UN is ready to undertake a peacekeeping mission, with a strong human rights monitoring section, and the US could use its seat in the Security Council to help make it happen. There would be a cost to the US, but it's a worthy investment. The human rights situation is dire, and yet it could get much worse, engulfing the entire region and creating a failed state many armed groups will be eager to exploit. A UN peacekeeping mission could help protect civilians and avert the worst, while it is still possible.

In the interim, there are three things the US should do while it actively works to secure a UN peacekeeping force.

First, the US should do more to support the current AU force on the ground – both diplomatically and technically – to ensure it is, at a minimum, regularly patrolling the streets and where possible, providing some measure of protection for civilians who have nowhere else to turn. Although the US has been a vocal supporter of the need for greater civilian protection in the Central African Republic, it has not allocated any funds for peacekeeping.

Second, the US could expand its humanitarian assistance in the Central African Republic. In late September, the US provided \$11.5 million for refugees who fled to neighboring countries, while in response to the dramatically deteriorating humanitarian situation a total of roughly \$17 million has been allocated for those suffering at the hands of Seleka and anti-Balaka forces, including \$8.2 million in emergency programs and \$8.8 million in food assistance in FY 2013. According to the UN, half of the population needs help. Although this is one of the worst situations in the world, it's also grossly underfunded.

Finally, the US could sanction those most responsible for human rights abuses, including Seleka leaders, with visa bans and asset freezes. It may be unlikely that these individuals actually have assets in the United States or intend to travel here but such a step would nonetheless make an important contribution toward accountability. The US could also work with other members of the UN Security Council to push for similar global UN sanctions against these individuals, to help raise the cost of abuses and seek to interrupt the cycle of violence.

Thank you Mr. Chairman, I'm happy to answer your questions.