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country summary

Central African Republic

Since gaining independence in 1960, the poverty stricken Central African Republic (CAR) has experienced dictatorial rule, corruption, and severe political instability. François Bozizé, the current President, came to power in a March 2003 military coup and in May 2005 won a contested election organized to legitimate his administration.

Since 2005, the government of President François Bozizé has been facing two major rebellions. The Popular Army for the Restoration of the Republic and Democracy (Armée Populaire pour la Restauration de la République et la Démocratie, APRD) is active in the northwestern provinces of Ouham, Ouham-Pende, and Nana-Grebizi. The Union of Democratic Forces for Unity (Union des Forces Démocratiques pour le Rassemblement, UFDR) is most active in the remote northeastern provinces of Bamingui-Bangoran and Vakaga. Although the CAR borders the volatile eastern region of Chad and war-ravaged Darfur in Sudan, the roots and dynamics of rebellion within the country are largely local, rather than being “spill-over” from the crises in neighboring states. The grievances of the main rebel protagonists lie in part in the exclusion of former President Patassé (1993-2003) from the political process, and in part in economic and social disparities.

Both rebel groups have used child soldiers, have been responsible for widespread looting and the forced taxation of the civilian population in areas they control; and rebels in the northeast have committed killings, beatings, and rape. However, it is the government’s Central African Armed Forces (Forces armées Centrafricaines, FACA) and elite Presidential Guard (Garde présidentielle, GP) that have been responsible for the majority of abuses—summary executions, unlawful killings, and village burnings—in northern CAR. Several hundred people have been killed and over 200,000 civilians have been displaced and now live in desperate conditions in the bush. Abuses by government forces often appear to have been committed in retaliation for rebel attacks. The perpetrators of violence and abuse, the vast

majority of them government soldiers, have enjoyed total impunity for acts that include war crimes.

Government Abuses in Northwestern CAR

The political grievances of supporters of former President Ange Felix Patassé, who was toppled by the 2003 coup and barred from competing in the 2005 election, and the failure of CAR security forces to protect local communities from banditry, are both important elements behind the emergence of the APRD. Armed bandits, known as zaraguinas or coupeurs de route, regularly attack villagers, kidnap children for ransom, and kill civilians. Cattle-herders from the Peulh ethnic group in the northwest have been particularly targeted because of their valuable livestock. The APRD's professed aim is to improve the security situation.

In direct response to APRD activity in the area, the CAR security forces have committed serious and widespread abuses against the civilian population, including multiple summary executions and unlawful killings, widespread burning of civilian homes, and the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of persons, instilling terror in the civilian population.

Evidence collected by Human Rights Watch suggests that hundreds of people have been killed by government security forces since 2005. In some cases dozens of civilians were killed in a single day, many suffering unspeakable brutality. For example, on February 11, 2006, a GP unit killed at least 30 civilians in more than a dozen separate villages located along the Nana-Barya to Bemal road. On March 22, 2006 this same GP unit beheaded a teacher in Bemal with a knife while he was still alive. Some victims are targeted simply for wearing amulets, a common accessory in the region. On January 27, 2007, FACA soldiers executed Roger Masamra, the son of the village catechist in Zoumanga, who was accused of being a rebel because he was wearing a traditional gri-gri amulet. On January 30, 2007, FACA forces executed an unidentified Chadian Christian merchant at the Kabo market, also because he was wearing protective gri-gri amulets, and had scars on his hands that the FACA soldiers claimed were old bullet wounds. According to a local humanitarian official the eyes of the victim had been gouged out. Other civilians have simply "disappeared" in military custody, arrested and not seen alive again.

Since December 2005, government forces, particularly the GP, have also been almost solely responsible for the burning down of more than 10,000 civilian homes in northwestern CAR. Hundreds of villages across vast swathes of northern CAR have been destroyed. Troops arrived in villages and indiscriminately fired into the civilian population, forcing them to flee before burning down their homes, sometimes looting them first. Over 100,000 civilians have been forced to abandon their roadside homes and live deep inside the bush, too fearful to return to their burned villages in case of repeat attack.

The displaced live in dire conditions with irregular access to clean water and food. Their widely dispersed shelters are beyond the reach of the humanitarian community. Educational facilities have been closed, and aside from mobile clinics run by international organizations in some areas, health care is non-existent.

Government Abuses in Northeastern CAR

The UFDR rebellion has its roots in the deep marginalization of northeastern CAR, which is virtually cut off from the rest of the country and is almost completely undeveloped. Elements from the Gula ethnic group, many of them trained militarily as anti-poaching units, are at the core of the rebellion, citing grievances such as discrimination against their community.

From October to December 2006, the UFDR rebel movement gained international attention by seizing military control of the major towns in the remote Vakaga and Bamingui-Bangoran provinces of northeastern CAR, right on the border of Sudan's Darfur region. The UFDR's bold military offensive led to French military intervention on behalf of the CAR government in December 2006, allowing the security forces to regain control of urban centers.

The rebellion has been accompanied by an increase in pre-existing anti-Gula sentiment among government officials, the military, and the general population. In late 2006, as CAR security forces were regaining control of northeastern urban centers occupied by the rebels, several suspected UFDR rebels were summarily executed, and numerous houses were burned down. Almost all of these abuses were

committed against ethnic Gulas, causing virtually the entire Gula population to flee from towns and villages formerly occupied by the UFDR, including Ndele, Ouadda, Ouanda Djalle, and Birao.

Rebel Abuses

APRD rebels in the northwest have engaged in widespread extortion, forced taxation, kidnappings for ransom, and beatings of civilians, particularly in the Batangafo-Kabo-Ouandago area of Ouham province. In that area, particularly on the Batangafo-Ouandago road, almost all villages have been systematically looted of all livestock, and village leaders have been regularly kidnapped for ransom. APRD rebels also have large numbers of child soldiers in their ranks, some as young as 12. Human Rights Watch documented one summary execution by the APRD in 2006.

UFDR rebels in the northeast have attacked villages and towns, often indiscriminately firing at fleeing civilians. UFDR rebels have also been responsible for summary executions of captured civilians. From October to December 2006, rebels carried out a massive looting campaign in areas they controlled. The UFDR also has child soldiers in its ranks, some of them forcibly recruited.

The Need for Accountability

Government abuses in northern CAR are no secret inside the country. Local newspapers and radio frequently report them, opposition parliamentarians have prepared public reports documenting the atrocities, and diplomatic envoys regularly raise their concerns with President Bozizé. However, even in the capital, Bangui, security forces carry out summary killings of suspected bandits and rebels with impunity.

In late 2007, following the publication of Human Rights Watch report in September, President Bozizé has publicly admitted that CAR forces have committed abuses and that those responsible will be held accountable. The Presidential Guard was temporarily withdrawn to Bangui. Despite this statement, the government has not investigated, prosecuted, or punished a single military officer and five civilians were

reportedly killed by the Presidential Guard and the FACA in late October and early November 2007 in the northwestern region.

Key International Actors

For much of the year, the current conflicts and the human rights situation in CAR were hardly on the international agenda. The International Criminal Court (ICC) prosecutor's office announced in May 2007 that they would investigate crimes committed in CAR during the 2002-2003 fighting, and that they would continue to monitor the current conflict. In October, the ICC opened a new field office in Bangui.

A 19-person human rights unit in the office of the United Nations Peace-building Support Office in the Central African Republic (BONUCA) has not effectively monitored or reported on human rights abuses in the north. The head of BONUCA was replaced at the end of 2007 and it is anticipated that more senior staff will be appointed to the human rights unit.

Largely in response to the risk of spillover from conflict in CAR's neighbors, a multi-dimensional international force for Chad and the Central African Republic (MINURCAT) was authorized by United Nations Security Council Resolution 1778 in September. It is due to deploy in Birao in northeastern CAR to secure the area but will not operate in the northwestern region where most human rights abuses have been committed.

Later in 2007 the issue of protection of civilians and abuses in the north became a central part of international engagement in CAR. President Sarkozy of France—without whose direct military support the government of President Bozizé would not survive—has declared that he was expecting “efforts in improving human rights” in CAR from President Bozizé. France has decided to review and may reconsider its military cooperation agreements with CAR but has not publicly demanded accountability for the crimes committed there.

In September 2007 Human Rights Watch published a major report on the human rights situation in the northern war zones.