



Despite the presence of peacekeepers and French soldiers, violence has continued to flare in the Central African Republic, where, after more than a year of bloodshed, thousands have been killed and a million sent fleeing. Pictured: A rebel fighter in the town of Bria in April 2014. (Reuters/Goran Tomasevic)

# Eight Days in Bangui

*By Evan Cinq-Mars*





The UN Security Council has authorized the deployment of around 12,000 peacekeepers to the Central African Republic in an effort to end the killing. Pictured: Peacekeepers from Morocco in Bangui in June 2014. (UN Photo/Catianne Tijerina)

**H**elicopters circled overhead as French and African Union (AU) forces sped out of M’Poko International Airport in Bangui. The capital of the Central African Republic (CAR) was in lockdown after AU peacekeepers declared war on the predominantly Christian militias, known locally as anti-balaka\* forces, following an ambush that claimed the lives of a number of its troops.

My colleagues at the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect and I collected our bags and searched for our driver. Bangui’s main roads were closed, and running battles were ongoing in a number of areas; our ride had been unable to make it.

Nearly four hours passed before two French gendarmes got us into the vehicles of diplomatic staff leaving the airport. After creeping through the streets of Bangui, we arrived at the Hotel Ledger Plaza Bangui, a surreal place where we sat on the sprawling poolside terrace adapting to our new, luxurious surroundings as gunshots and grenade explosions rang out beyond the hotel’s guarded entrance. This became a nightly ritual during our time in CAR.

We had come to CAR to assess efforts to uphold the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle—a commitment made by all UN members to prevent and halt genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing.

The country was in the midst of a brutal conflict that erupted when the Muslim Seleka rebel alliance began a march on Bangui to topple the government of then-President Francois Bozize in late 2012. The Seleka’s advance was marked by gruesome atrocities, including a penchant for targeting CAR’s majority Christian population. As mediation faltered, in March 2013 the Seleka overthrew the Bozize government and took control of CAR.

Anti-balaka militias sprang up as local self-defense forces in the north and west of CAR in the face of continued Seleka abuses. But elements of the militias also began to turn their weapons on the Muslim population and anyone supportive of the Seleka.

Their vengeance culminated in a December 2013 attack on Bangui and the partial capture of Bossangoa, a city north of the capital, where militias were supported by armed loyalists of the ousted former president and elements from the national army. The attacks set off a cycle of tit-for-tat violence between the Seleka and anti-balaka militias.



More than 2,000 people have been killed since December in Bangui alone, according to the United Nations. The death toll in the capital is likely much higher than that, and countless massacres have been perpetrated in the interior of the country. No one really knows how many have been killed.

## MUSLIMS UNDER SIEGE

Hampered by waning authority, a lack of capacity, and an uncontrollable security situation, the transitional government, which was set up to bring an end to the violence, has been unable to meet its responsibilities.

There are 2,000 French forces, 5,800 AU peacekeepers, and 700 European Union troops on the ground seeking to protect civilians and restore security. We were told that the French and AU forces have prevented “Srebrenica-style massacres” in CAR. But as many troops as there are in number, the current arrangement is overstretched, underresourced, and unable to provide adequate protection to civilians.

The UN Security Council has mandated the deployment of a 12,000-strong peacekeeping operation, but troops and police will only start deploying in September 2014. The expectations for the UN peacekeepers are incredibly high—nearly every resident we spoke with said they wanted the UN force to bring peace to CAR.

In the interim, as the United Nations plans and prepares for the troop deployment, civilians continue to suffer. The conflict has been particularly brutal for CAR’s minority Muslim population. At least 80 percent of Muslims have been forced to flee or been killed since December, according to UN estimates. The remaining Muslims, figured to be anywhere from 10,000 to 15,000 people, are living in besieged areas.

Evacuations and relocations of thousands of these civilians have had to proceed. UN officials and humanitarian groups worried that any transfer could perpetuate ethnic cleansing but decided that the action was necessary. Our thoughts were clear: If populations in these enclaves wanted to go, and if the alternative to relocation was death, then it had to be facilitated.

Despite the surging interreligious fighting, government officials were adamant that the conflict was not a religious one. Religion, we were told, was being manipulated to mobilize communities against one another as CAR’s political elites jockeyed for power. While this was true, the fury of the sectarian violence was hard to ignore.

On March 27, our second day in Bangui, two grenade explosions pierced the air as we sat on the hotel’s terrace. We heard the next morning that Muslim youths had attacked a Christian funeral procession with grenades.

## BOTTOM OF THE BOTTOM OF THE LIST

On one of our final days in the country, UN staff facilitated a tour of a site where thousands of civilians had sought refuge from the fighting in Bangui. The conditions in the camp were harsh and would only get worse with the looming rainy season.

We were taken to where displaced children went to learn. The toll on CAR’s children has been brutal—more than 6,000 child soldiers are in the ranks of armed groups. The makeshift classroom we visited was a sanctuary from the violence for the children inside. We later walked by a group of young boys lost in a game of soccer on a break between classes. It was heartening to see their smiles. It was equally heartbreaking. With no end to the violence in sight, what would happen to them?

The international community has enacted most measures under the R2P framework in CAR—from the deployment of peacekeepers to diplomacy, support to the government, sanctions, and the involvement of the International Criminal Court. Yet the response has still been inadequate, and all of the Muslims of CAR may be driven out or killed before the UN peacekeeping operation arrives.

We will have to account for how we failed to prevent the forcible displacement and killing in CAR. And we will struggle, once again, with what it means to say “Never again.”

On one of our last nights in Bangui, while confined to the hotel’s terrace after dark, my colleagues and I talked with UN officials about the situation. The sad truth of it, they said, is that CAR is a “bottom of the bottom of the list” crisis. As the words sunk in, I wondered: How many more times must we hear this awful excuse before we match our words with deeds?

\* *Anti-balaka* is an umbrella term referring to various groups currently engaged in armed resistance against Seleka rebels in CAR (*balaka* is a Sango word for “machete”; *anti-balaka* means “invincible”).

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