



A woman in Bria sitting in front of her house, which has been destroyed by the attacks of armed groups - Pablo Tosco/Oxfam

## CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC: UNPROTECTED ZONES

### The suffering of the civilian population in Haute-Kotto

Although stability appears to be returning to the Central African Republic, the root causes of the crisis have not been resolved. Indeed, while there have been no intercommunal clashes in the east of the country, it remains in the grip of non-state armed groups. This briefing illustrates how the population of Haute-Kotto, which has been overlooked for decades due to the weakness of the state, risks having to continue to suffer various forms of abuse and violence. The new MINUSCA mandate established by Resolution 2301 seems impracticable given the limited financial and human resources currently available to it. For these reasons, special attention must be given to the strategies for its implementation and the prioritization of its activities.

# SUMMARY

The Central African Republic (CAR) continues to face a serious crisis whose violent effects on the civilian population can still be felt. Despite the presidential elections which took place without incident at the start of 2016, and a degree of stability observed in the west of the country, the fate of many civilians remains worrying. In the east of the country, for example, several areas are still in the hands of violent non-state actors, including armed groups, militias and other unidentified outlaws engaging in acts of violence that affect civilians on a daily basis. The subsiding of the clashes between the Anti-balaka militias and the ex-Seleka fighters in the east of CAR has resulted in this region being overlooked and forgotten in the security and humanitarian responses implemented in the country over several years.

The presence of Oxfam and its work with the population of Haute-Kotto in the east of CAR have made it possible to gain a better understanding of the context and of the different forms of violence and other threats to which civilians are exposed. The presence of MINUSCA (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic) and the return of the administrative authorities to Bria in February 2015 appear to have reduced the activities and movements of armed groups within the town of Bria, which have been pushed back into the rural areas of Haute-Kotto.

The region continues to be confronted with the presence of these different non-state armed groups, although it has been spared the level of intercommunal violence occurring in the rest of the country. Although Bria is largely under the control of the state and MINUSCA, it still experiences waves of urban violence and high crime levels. The spontaneous return of armed ex-combatants to their communities and the arrival in Bria since July 2016 of numerous ex-combatants for a large political and military conference has contributed to the high rates of violence and physical assaults in the town. Bria is currently the scene of numerous stabbings, robberies and crime. The weakness of the justice system and the inability of the penal system in general to restore the rule of law encourage complete impunity and a culture of violence.

The violence that occurs outside the town is largely between different ex-Seleka factions which have settled in rural parts of the region, mainly around the diamond mines some twenty miles from Bria. Their growing influence in this region is added to that of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), which is headed by the Ugandan rebel leader Joseph Kony. In the context of a near-absence of state authority, these groups are freely violating the rights of the civilian population.

The absence of good governance, the centralization of authority and the weakness of the state have gradually led to entire regions being controlled by armed groups which are often in search of mining resources to further their developmentalist aims.

Despite their current willingness to act, the state and MINUSCA have not yet managed to improve the security conditions in the east of the country. Their limited human and financial resources have given the population – particularly women – the impression that the responses proposed lack speed and effectiveness. Women and girls are still exposed to daily sexual and gender-based violence. The weakness of the state and MINUSCA gives rise to huge challenges such as the persistence of insecurity, impunity, conflicts linked to transhumance and the delay of the disarmament, demobilisation, reintegration and repatriation (DDRR) programme, for which they have only offered partial solutions.

During previous crises, the return of calm often precipitated the withdrawal of international support, after which the country is once again ignored. The support of regional and international actors is still needed in CAR, particularly for political dialogue and stability. The neighbouring countries also have a key role to play in relation to political dialogue, security and the success of the DDR programme. By providing the state with technical and financial support, actors of the international and regional community, humanitarian organizations and MINUSCA could bring about real lasting change in the country through addressing current needs.

Local communities are subjected to various forms of attack, the absence of the rule of law, as well as various other hardships and restrictions. The following recommendations are made to the state, to regional and international actors, to MINUSCA and to donors with a view to better protecting the population.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **For the attention of the Government of the Central African Republic**

- Quickly increase the presence and logistical and technical capacity of the decentralized government agencies both in the town of Bria and in the rural areas of Haute-Kotto; strengthening law enforcement teams, the justice system and social services to combat crime, poverty and urban violence by setting up spaces for dialogue and community protection.
- Expedite the implementation of an inclusive national DDR programme centred on sustainable community-based reintegration mechanisms which are sensitive to the specific cultural and sociological characteristics of the different communities of Haute-Kotto.
- Restore social justice and promote reconciliation between the different social groups and communities by supporting local and traditional conflict management mechanisms and building the capacity of community leaders.
- Ensure the application of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 by involving women and female leaders from Haute-Kotto in the current political dialogue, particularly by guaranteeing their presence on local committees working for peace and DDR.

### **For the attention of MINUSCA**

- Increase the human and financial resources of the forces deployed in Haute-Kotto, in the form of a Formed Police Unit (FPU), in order to strengthen their presence and protection activities (patrols, community policing, alert mechanisms) both in the town of Bria and in the rural areas where armed groups continue to proliferate.
- Discuss and define with the communities of Haute-Kotto MINUSCA's new civilian protection strategy in order to realistically and proactively perform the priority tasks of Security Council Resolution 2301, such as protecting civilians and DDR activities.
- Strengthen links with the civilian population, especially via primary and secondary roads; increase the presence of women in community networks and equip them with alert systems to prevent and quickly act against violence by armed groups.

### **For the attention of the donors**

- Finance community training and social and professional reintegration programmes that contribute to the lasting reintegration of young ex-combatants and young people at risk in their communities.

- Finance national and international organizations working to reduce community violence, improve community protection, care for victims of sexual and gender-based violence and implement programmes to support the socio-economic development of the communities affected by the current crisis.
- Finance the restoration of state authority, projects to strengthen community protection structures and the implementation of essential services in Haute-Kotto.

### **For the attention of the African Union, ECCAS, the European Union and the UN Security Council**

- Continue to support political dialogue with all the stakeholders in the peace process, including the non-state armed groups based in Haute-Kotto.
- Maintain interest in the Central African Republic and improve the international and regional response by proposing sustainable security solutions for prefectures like Haute-Kotto.

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email [advocacy@oxfaminternational.org](mailto:advocacy@oxfaminternational.org)

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