

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC: Who's who with guns

BANGUI, 17 June 2009 (IRIN) -

Lasting security remains elusive in the north and northeast of Central African Republic, despite truces struck with armed groups and a national conference held in late 2008 in an effort to steer the country out of a devastating cycle of violence that has persisted more or less since independence in 1960.

Over the last couple of years separate ceasefires have been signed by the government and different rebel movements and a [Comprehensive Peace Accord](#) was finalized in June 2008. In December of that year, an Inclusive Political Dialogue was held, bringing together representatives of government, various rebellions and the international community. In January 2009 a "government of national unity" was formed, giving some positions to rebel leaders.

However, conflict has continued in 2009, partly because some armed groups feel the government has failed to follow through on the commitments made during the dialogue.

This is an overview of the various armed politico-military groups, criminal gangs, government security forces and international military missions in the country.

State security forces (Forces armées centrafricaines) – FACA

The national army numbers some 5,000 men but fewer than half are thought to be available for military duty at any one time. Almost the entire army is based in the capital, Bangui.

International human rights groups accused FACA of attacking hundreds of villages during their operations against rebel groups between mid-2005 and mid-2007. In various crises since independence, according to a May 2009 [report](#) by Philip Alston, UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions, "Killings by the security forces have been common, and impunity for abuses has prevailed. The security forces have been unable either to protect human rights or to respect human rights, and the Government has been, in turns, unwilling and unable to punish violations."

Such violation led to widespread [internal displacement](#) in CAR, where more than 100,000 people still live in rudimentary bush settlements.

As well as being undermanned, the army is under-resourced, poorly trained and under-armed, and has a weak command and control structure. But it is set to undergo major reorganization under a broad reform of the security sector.

Garde présidentielle – GP

Formally known as the Bataillon de Protection et Sécurité des Institutions, this special service in charge of presidential security has some police and gendarmerie personnel, but most are drawn from FACA. Some of its units are reported to operate more or less autonomously, outside the FACA chain of command.

The presidential guard was singled out by [human rights groups](#) and Alston for its brutality and poor discipline. Alston named one Lt. Eugene Ngaïkossé as being responsible “for commanding troops who carried out the more egregious instances of village burnings, the targeting of civilians, and unlawful killings of suspected rebels”. Although GP later improved its record under direct instructions from President Francois Bozizé, there were reports of atrocities in 2009, prompting significant flight of civilians.

Politico-military groups

L’Armée populaire pour la restauration de la république et la démocratie – APRD

The Peoples’ Army for the Restoration of the Republic and of Democracy emerged after elections in May 2005, which legitimized the presidency of Bozizé, who had ousted Ange-Félix Patassé in a coup two years previously. Many of the APRD’s several hundred members had served in Patassé’s presidential guard and were dismayed by his exclusion from that poll.

Members of self-defence groups formed at the village level across northern CAR to protect against bandits (see below) and other threats are among those in the APRD. Members of the Sara-Kaba ethnic group dominate its ranks.

The APRD boasts little in the way of weaponry, vehicles or other equipment. Many of its firearms are artisanal rifles.

Clashes between the APRD and the army began in June 2005. In January 2006, the APRD attacked the northwestern town of Paoua in Ouham-Pendé prefecture, much of which it still controls, where tens of thousands of people have been displaced because of its activities and government reprisals. It is also active in Ouham and Nanagrebizi prefectures.

The political leader of the APRD is Jean-Jacques Demafouth, a lawyer who served as Patassé’s defence minister and is a likely candidate for the 2010 election, although it is unclear how much operational control Demafouth has over APRD forces on the ground.

The group’s leadership claims its main aim is to protect civilians in areas under its control from bandits, government forces and allied troops from neighbouring Chad, and to increase the region’s representation in government, rather than to overthrow Bozizé’s administration.

Yet Alston cited cases of extra-judicial killing by the APRD and human rights advocacy groups have accused it of abuses such as abduction, extortion and illegal taxation.

The APRD is party to the peace process in CAR, and underage fighters within its ranks are undergoing demobilization and reintegration.

While it has not clashed recently with government forces, skirmishes have taken place with bandits and Peulh cattle-herders, undermining efforts to restore security.

Union des forces démocratiques pour le rassemblement – UFDR

The Union of Democratic Forces for Unity was formed in September 2006. It is active in the Arabic-speaking northeastern Vakaga and Haute Kotto prefectures and is made up largely of the mainly-Muslim Gula ethnic group. It is operationally led by Damane Zacharia, also known as Capt Yao, although other commanders challenge his leadership.

Its ranks include men who helped Bozizé overthrow Patassé in 2003 but who subsequently felt disgruntled with the lack of recompense. The group's leadership says they sought to reverse the region's chronic underdevelopment and political marginalization.

Little progress has been made on provisions of a 2007 peace accord, with the government providing for the full reintegration of UFDR fighters into the national army. However, its forces have worked alongside those of the army. Internal divisions among its political and military leadership have led to open hostility between rival factions.

The UFDR's fighters – which it claims number about 1,200 – are better trained and armed than the country's other politico-military groups.

Le Front démocratique du peuple centrafricain – FDPC

The [Democratic Front of the Central African People](#) is led by Martin Koumtamadji – better known as Abdoulaye Miskine - who is close to Patassé. It initially controlled only a very small area near the Chadian border with a handful of combatants.

Miskine signed a ceasefire in December 2006 but has since limited his involvement in the peace process.

The FDPC expanded in late 2008, in the run-up to the national dialogue, launching attacks against the army. In February 2009, together with the MLCJ (see below), the FDPC threatened to return to all-out war, accusing Bozizé of reneging on peace process commitments and of acting in bad faith. Later that month, the FDPC and MLCJ mounted two attacks against government forces. In its attack on the town of Batangafo, the group seized weapons from the army and food from aid agency warehouses. Further clashes took place in April and May.

Convention des patriotes pour la justice et la paix (CPJP)

The Convention of Patriots for Justice and Peace was formed in late 2008 and is present in the northeast. Its political wing is led by Charles Massi, who served as a minister under Patassé. The group mounted at least two attacks in early 2009. An attack by government forces against a CPJP base in Akoursoulbak, a village 75km north of N'délé in Bamingui-Bangoran province (in retaliation for a rebel attack against a police station the previous month), prompted 5,000 civilians to flee, mostly to Chad, and many humanitarian agencies to temporarily evacuate N'dele.

The group clashed with the army in March 2009 and again, in N'dele, in mid-June. Massi was arrested in Chad in early June 2009 as he tried to cross into CAR. He is to face trial for “attempting to destabilize a neighbouring country”.

The connection between political leaders (abroad or in Bangui) and their combatants on the ground is minimal, and their numbers are largely unknown.

Le Mouvement des libérateurs centrafricains pour la justice (MLCJ)

Led by Abakor Sabone, the Movement of Central African Liberators for Justice broke away from the UFDR in August 2008. It signed the comprehensive peace accord in December 2008 but in February 2009 announced, together with the FDPC, that it was taking up arms again. Sabone accused Bozize of acting in bad faith and complained that his men had been left out of the DDR process.

Lord's Resistance Army (LRA)

The [LRA](#) is a Ugandan rebel movement formed in the mid-1980s with the stated aim of overthrowing the government of President Yoweri Museveni and has a long record of brutal human rights abuses. For the past four years its main bases have been in the Garamba National Park in northeast Democratic Republic of Congo and the first reports of its presence in CAR emerged in early 2008 when it mounted incursions into the extreme southeast of the country, presumably to stock up on food and other supplies, as well as forcibly recruiting civilians.

Its forces in DRC were scattered during [Operation Lightning Thunder](#), carried out by Uganda, DRC and Southern Sudan.

Bandits

Known variously as coupeurs de routes (highwaymen), Zaraguina, or simply bandits, these are mostly well-organised and well-armed criminal gangs that kill, kidnap for ransom, loot and set fire to homes. In the absence of effective national security forces, they do so with impunity. Peulh cattle-raisers are the main targets, because of the value of their herds.

Their attacks have prompted tens of thousands of people to flee their villages for a precarious life in the bush; hindered access to fields and markets; reduced imports along key trade routes, especially from Cameroon, and delayed the return of CAR refugees from Chad. They are not accounted for in any peace accord.

Poachers

Heavily armed Sudanese poachers operate in CAR. It is estimated that in 2007 alone they were responsible for killing 2,000 elephants in the east. While they rarely target civilians, they are a symptom of the lack of general security and absence of the rule of law.

International forces

UN Mission in CAR and Chad (MINURCAT)

MINURCAT is a UN force whose role is training police and improving judicial infrastructure. It comprises 350 police and military personnel and has taken over the operations of EUFOR, a European Union force authorised by the UN Security Council to operate in both eastern Chad and northeastern CAR, where it has a mandate to protect civilians, facilitate humanitarian assistance and protect UN personnel.

Mission de consolidation de la paix en Centrafrique – MICOPAX

The Central African Peace Consolidation Mission is a multinational force mandated to contribute to durable peace and security in CAR and to facilitate political dialogue. It consists of 500 soldiers and civilians from the Republic of Congo, Gabon, Chad and Cameroon. It operates under the aegis of the Economic Community of Central African States.