

Eight Days in Bangui

The Stanley Foundation/Global Centre for Centre for the Responsibility to Protect

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12 August 2014

Helicopters 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 [an ti-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. (...)

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