



CONFLICT IN CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC



Conflict in the Central African Republic

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Introduction

Only a year has passed since the escalation of the military conflict in Mali, where the European Union (EU) nations, including Latvia, intervened to try to find a solution. The attention of the international community is currently focussed on a different African nation, the Central African Republic, where violent conflict has arisen between Muslim and Christian communities, causing political instability and a serious humanitarian crisis. Traditionally, the UN peace-keeping mission and neighbouring countries provide support in regulating conflict, with France playing a significant role, but events in recent months show that the support of the EU is also needed. On 8th May 2014, the Latvian parliament voted in favour of Latvian armed forces taking part in the EU military mission in the Central African Republic (CAR), and sent 30-40 soldiers. The aim of this strategic brief is to describe the conflict in the CAR, the parties involved in trying to find a solution, and the EU military mission, with an analysis of the arguments 'for' and 'against Latvia's involvement.

Conflict in the CAR – an everyday phenomenon

In analysing the history of the CAR conflict, it should be pointed out that violent conflicts over political power between the various communities within the country have taken place regularly in the past twenty years. Among the causes of the political instability in the CAR are the weak democratic traditions (the first free elections only took place in 1993), the elected political leaders' authoritarian style of rule and their inability to form a government, which would include a wide representation of groups in the community. At the same time internal political instability and violent conflicts in neighbouring countries – Chad, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo – and the free movement of rebel groups from one country to another, have also facilitated the outbreak of conflict.

The origins of the current conflict can be found late in 2012, when insurgents in the northern and central parts of the CAR seized town after town, demanding that President Francois Bozize step down from power. Michel Djotodia, with the support of Muslim rebel groups, unseated Bozize from power a few months later, despite the *Libreville* Agreement (Security Council, 2013), signed in January 2013 between the government and the rebels, after pressure from the UN. Djotodia was, however, unable to disarm all of his supporters and achieve stability in the country. The most radical Muslim rebel group *Seleka* launched violent activities against the Christian community. The Christian community formed the *anti-balaka* militias in response. The height of violence in the conflict was reached at the end of the year, when the UN and France drew the attention of the international community to the genocide taking place, and to the potential collapse of the CAR. Currently, all attempts have been focussed on the stabilization of the situation – an interim president, Catherine Samba-Panza was elected to overcome the political crisis. UN agencies and the EU have also been involved in resolving the humanitarian crisis and providing assistance to

Bangui, while France is attempting to disarm the rebels on both sides of the conflict in cooperation with the UN peace-keeping mission.

Parties involved in the solution of the CAR conflict – a wide spectrum with little effectiveness

A multilateral approach has been used in the stabilization of the situation in the CAR since the mid-1990s, with a number of third parties, like France, the UN and regional countries getting involved. Traditionally, the EU has been the greatest contributor financially, through its many support programmes. Even though the parties involved in solving the conflict have implemented all formal measures – the organization of elections, using the tactic of conciliation between conflicting parties and others – the goal of achieving enduring stability still hasn't been achieved.

UN. The first UN peace-keeping mission MINURCA (UN Mission in the Central African Republic) was already created in 1998, when France and the CAR's neighbouring countries were unable to cope with the increasing violence themselves and unable to organize elections to ensure political stability. After two years, the UN peace-building support institution BONUCA (renamed BINUCA in 2009) was created, to secure peace and to rebuild the country in the long-term, and still operates today. The UN representation in CAR in collaboration with France, and the military forces of neighbouring countries, has tried to achieve enduring stability within the country with varying degrees of success. But, with the outbreak of violent conflict in Chad and taking into account the influence of the conflicting parties on both nations, the MINURCAT peace-keeping mission (UN Mission in the Central African Republic and Chad) was created in 2007.

But, this approach was also marked by failure, as the security situation throughout the region had already deteriorated significantly in 2011, with armed conflicts of varying intensity breaking out in the CAR, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan and Uganda. The UN has been criticized for its inability to develop an effective regional strategy (Security Council Report, 2013). Insufficient funding, the small number of personnel and the UN mission's limited mandate, are traditionally mentioned as the main causes for its ineffectiveness. The last mission created by the UN is MISCA (the African Union's International Support Mission to the CAR) with 4,400 military personnel. It was created in reaction to the increasing violence between *Seleka* and *anti-balaka* groups, with the aim being to protect civilians, support attempts for reform and to provide the conditions for the provision of humanitarian aid (UN Department of Public Information, 2013).

France. Its influence on the CAR has been significant, even after the renewal of the CAR's independence in 1960. France has been a joint participant in nearly all of the CAR's political processes and at times when conflict has escalated, has mobilized the UN Security Council to act. Despite France's long-term support in the stabilization of the CAR, it is often criticized for practicing imperialistic foreign policy and for defending its economic interests in its former colony. It doesn't try to solve the conflicts at their source, but instead confines itself to the election of political elites sympathetic to it and to providing relative stability, so

that its economic interests aren't threatened. Criticism of France's interest in ensuring the uninterrupted extraction of uranium has been heard in the CAR, which also has deposits of gold, diamonds and uranium.¹ France has created Operation *Sangaris* (with 1,600 soldiers) to solve the current conflict between *Seleka* and *anti-balaka* groups. It is also undertaking the disarmament of rebels and attempting to reinstate order in collaboration with soldiers from other African nations within the UN's MISCA mission framework.

EU. Financial support has been the cornerstone of EU foreign policy in stabilizing the situation in the CAR. It has been the largest provider of humanitarian aid to those affected by the crisis, providing 20 million euros in 2012 and 76 million euros in 2013. An allocation of 225 million euros has also been provided through the EU's Development Cooperation Support Programme from 2008 until 2013. At the same time it has supported the mission led by the CAR's neighbouring countries to stabilize the situation in the CAR financially, to the extent of 90 million euros. Finally, the EU created a military mission in Chad (EUFOR Tchad/RCA) in late 2007, to stabilize the CAR's north-east and the eastern part of Chad, which ended in March 2009, with the handing over of authority to the previously mentioned UN mission - MINURCAT.

Breaking out the crisis, in the beginning of 2014 the EU expressed a readiness to develop a military mission in the CAR, sending 600 military personnel to provide support to the MISCA and BINUCA missions to achieve their goals. The mandate for the missions doesn't indicate clear tasks for the missions, merely stating that they will be 6 months long, and that among the responsibilities will be to ensure security around Bangui, where the largest concentration of refugees is located, and the provision of humanitarian aid, until the African Union can take control of the situation (UN Department of Public Information, 2014). On February 2014 the EU officially launched its military operation EUFOR RCA (UN Security Council, 2014) which reached its full operation capability in June commanding 700 hundred soldiers and policemen whose main responsibility is to provide security in Bangui, especially in the districts around the airport (Communique de Presse, 2014). The mission is led by Major-General Philippe Ponties (Press office, 28 January 2014) and its operational headquarters is at Larissa in Greece (Press office, 20 January 2014).

Even though decisions are still being made about the involvement, and extent of involvement, of specific countries, and the operational framework, Sweden, Estonia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Finland, Belgium and Poland have confirmed their participation. Meanwhile, the EU's most powerful nations militarily, Germany, the United Kingdom and Italy, have not expressed a readiness to become involved in the mission, merely deliberating on the option of providing support for some specific military capacity (for example, Germany's support for air transport). As a consequence, the EU's internal problems are revealed in this situation. Firstly, for example, the repeated inability to activate the EU Battle group mechanism (the first occasion was in Mali), which casts doubt on the EU military's ambition of becoming an effective crisis trouble-shooter. Secondly,

¹ See, for example: The FASHODA Institute (16 December 2013). France's Operation Sangaris Exacerbates Violence in CAR, Seeks to Secure French Uranium Supply. South Sudan Studies.

France's dominance in the EU Common Security and Defence Policy framework and its economic interests in its former colonies, and the disinclination of other leading EU nations to get involved which have a critical effect on the legitimacy of such a mission (Larive, 2014). Thirdly, even though the EU gesture to create a military mission is being viewed positively, there has been criticism of the small number of military personnel, the limited military capacity and the narrow mission mandate, which is unlikely to make any real contribution to the solution of the conflict (Matthaei, 2014).

Latvia's involvement in the EU military mission – the arguments 'for' and 'against'

A number of arguments 'for' and 'against' can be identified in considering Latvia's involvement in the EU military mission in the CAR. Among the arguments in favour of involvement in the mission are, firstly, political arguments. The approach of Latvia's presidency of the EU and the fact that the other Baltic nations have expressed a readiness to get involved creates certain pressure on decision-makers to confirm that Latvia will be an active builder of EU security policy. At the same time, Latvia could also position itself as a solver of the humanitarian crisis, bearing in mind the UN's sizable request for the involvement of a wide range of countries to provide humanitarian aid to the CAR. Secondly, operational arguments – the issue of new operational areas for Latvia's armed forces arises with the closure of the NATO mission in Afghanistan at the end of this year. At the same time, considering the current issue of Latvia's cooperation partners in the operational area, Latvia has already cooperated previously with Poland and Sweden. Finally, the tasks currently included in the mission's mandate do not foresee a high level of danger, as they don't include direct conflict with the rebels.

However, arguments against Latvia's involvement in the mission are connected with the mission's own political and operational responsibilities. From a political perspective, the legitimacy of the mission is questionable, as the leading EU member nations are not involved and criticism has been heard about France's dominating role in the creation of this mission and its obvious economic interests in the CAR, which even overshadow its declared wish to stop the genocide in the country. At the same time, the question arises as to the contribution of such a mission to the EU as an active player in global security. The tasks included in the mandate – airport security and the provision of humanitarian aid – don't position the EU as a conflict trouble-shooter, but rather as the provider of a support function for the military operation begun by France. From another angle, a number of risks can also be identified in the operational sense.

Firstly, the tasks of the mission envisage a need to despatch infantry, which casts doubt on the significance of the experience to be gained by the Latvian armed forces, who have long-term experience in international operations and have developed expertise in certain areas of military competence. Secondly, the lessons learned from the missions in Afghanistan and Iraq show how important it is to know the local culture and the causes of the conflict. At the moment, the Latvian armed forces don't have a full understanding of the causes and nature of the conflict taking place in the CAR, nor the idiosyncrasies of the local culture, which could create certain dangers. As a consequence, without denying the arguments in favour

of the involvement of the Latvian armed forces in the EU military mission in the CAR, there is a need to evaluate the compatibility of the risks mentioned with Latvia's national interests from a long-term perspective.

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