

An hourglass-shaped graphic with a globe inside. The top bulb is dark blue, and the bottom bulb is light blue. The globe is centered in the narrow neck of the hourglass. The text is centered within the hourglass.

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The Central African Republic

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November 2, 2007

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Summary

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Background

The Central African Republic (CAR), a landlocked country of 4.3 million people, became independent in 1960. David Dacko became the first President under a one-party system. On December 31, 1965, Dacko was ousted from power in a military coup led by his cousin, Colonel Jean-Bedel Bokassa. In 1966, Bokassa dissolved the legislature and rescinded the Constitution. In 1972, Bokassa became “Life President” and later named himself “Marshall of the Republic.” In December 1976, Bokassa renamed the CAR the Central African Empire and later had himself crowned emperor in a lavish ceremony attended by thousands of guests. Human rights violations and rumors of bizarre practices helped prepare the way for Bokassa’s 1979 ouster by David Dacko in a coup backed by French troops. Dacko, in turn, was overthrown in 1981 by General André Kolingba, whose authoritarian regime lasted until 1993, when elections were held. This democratic transition followed a long period of unrest, including recurrent strikes and opposition protests, sparked in part by the country’s economic stagnation. The election was won by Ange Patassé, who had once served Bokassa as prime minister, but later became a leading opponent of the former Emperor.

Current Political Situation

In April and May 1996, the CAR army mutinied; and only the intervention of French troops kept President Patassé in power. While the mutineers returned to base, the rebellion was by no means crushed, and a further outbreak occurred in November. The mutinies resulted in part from the dissatisfaction of soldiers over salary delays, but there was an ethnic dimension as well, since most of the soldiers were from former President Kolingba’s Yakoma ethnic group, while Patassé is from another ethnic group, the Sara.

A regional mediation effort followed the November 1996 clashes, but in January 1997, two French soldiers were assassinated, and heavy fighting broke out between French troops and the mutineers. Nonetheless, mediation efforts undertaken by the heads of state of Gabon, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mali continued, leading to the convening of an all-party conference in Bangui, the capital, at the end of the month. The Bangui Agreements reached at this conference called, among other measures, for the establishment of a government of national unity; amnesty for the mutineers; the disarmament of mutineers, militias, and the civilian population; and the convening of a National Reconciliation Conference in February 1998.

Meanwhile, several francophone states created the Inter-African Mission to Monitor the Implementation of the Bangui Agreements (MISAB), sending in 800 peacekeeping soldiers. This operation was endorsed by the United Nations Security Council. MISAB made significant progress in implementing the disarmament provisions of the Bangui Agreements. It also took on general security functions in Bangui in order to suppress a crime wave. In March 1998, MISAB was replaced by a stronger United Nations force—the United Nations Mission in the Central African Republic (MINURCA)—consisting of nearly 1,400 African troops.

The National Reconciliation Conference concluded on March 5, 1998, with an agreement among all political parties to accept the ballot box as the only means of taking power, and to refrain from using the army to destabilize the country. In November 1998, legislative elections, contested by 29 parties, were held. The Movement for the Liberation of the Central African People (MLCP) won 47 of the 109 seats in the National Assembly.

In March 2003, a rebellion led by former Army Chief of Staff Francois Bozize ousted President Patasse from power. Bozize declared himself President, suspended the Constitution, and dissolved the National Assembly. In December 2004, a new Constitution was approved by referendum. In March 2005, presidential and legislative elections were held. In May 2005, Bozize defeated former Prime Minister Martin Ziguele in a second-round election. In the legislative elections, Bozize's Convergence Kwa na Kwa party won 42 of the 105 seats in the National Assembly, while the former ruling MLCP won 11 seats.

Central African Republic in Brief

Population: 4.3 million

Growth Rate: 1.5 % (2007 est.)

Size: slightly smaller than Texas

Literacy: 51 %

Religion: indigenous beliefs, 35%; Protestant, 25%; Roman Catholic, 25%; Muslim, 15%; Note: animistic beliefs strongly influence Christian community

Economy: dependent on subsistence agriculture; exports primarily timber (16%) and diamonds (40%), also cotton, coffee.

GDP (purchasing power parity): U.S. \$4.9 billion (U.S. \$340 per capita). (2006 est.)

Sources: U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, World Factbook 2007.

Human Rights Conditions

Human rights conditions in the Central African Republic are poor, according to human rights groups. According to the State Department, there were improvements in some areas, although “the government’s respect for human rights deteriorated overall.” According to the State Department’s *Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 2006*:

Reports of extrajudicial killings by the Central Office for the Repression of Banditry (OCRB) decreased, but reports of the military killing civilians increased sharply due to government counteroffensive operations against rebels in the north. Acts of torture, beatings, rape, and other abuses of suspects and prisoners by security forces continued to be a problem. Impunity, particularly military impunity, worsened. Conditions in prisons and detention centers remained harsh and life threatening. The government’s use of arbitrary arrest and detention increased significantly, particularly following fighting in the north between rebels and the military, which contributed to an increase in political detainees. Prolonged pretrial detention, denial of a fair trial, and judicial corruption continued to be problems. The government restricted freedom of the press, although to a lesser extent than in

the previous year. Freedom of movement deteriorated greatly because of actions by security forces, armed bandits, and rebels.¹

According to Human Rights Watch, government security forces routinely target civilians they suspect of being supporters of rebel groups. According to a September 2007 Human Rights Watch report “since mid-2005, hundreds of civilians have been killed, more than 10 thousand houses burned, and approximately 212,000 persons have fled their homes in terror to live in desperate conditions deep in the bush in northern Central African Republic (CAR).”² Rebel groups have also been engaged in human rights abuses against civilians, including beatings, kidnappings for ransom, and looting. Human rights advocates argue that the civilian population, especially those in conflict areas and near the border with Sudan, need protection.

The Darfur Conflict and Impact on CAR

The crisis in Darfur continues to affect Chad and the Central African Republic, in large part due to rebellions supported by the Government of Sudan against the governments of Chad and CAR, according to officials in the region and human rights groups. Indeed, the conflicts in Chad and CAR are largely internal political disputes between the respective governments and a number of armed groups.

In the Central African Republic, the fighting between rebel groups and government forces has displaced more than 70,000 people in northeastern CAR. Over the past several months, the CAR government has recaptured towns taken by rebel groups. The CAR armed forces, supported by French troops and a multinational force from the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) have largely succeeded in containing rebel advances. Meanwhile, negotiations between the government of President Francois Bozizé and several rebel groups have led to some agreements. In February 2007, in negotiations mediated by Libya, two rebel leaders, Abdoulaye Miskine and André Ringui Le Gaillard, signed an agreement with the CAR government. However, the agreement was rejected by the military chief of one of the rebel groups.

The United Nations has been working toward the deployment of a peacekeeping force to Chad and CAR over the past several months. The United Nations has concluded two technical assessment missions to Chad and CAR. The mandate of the proposed U.N. multidimensional presence would include the protection of civilians and internally displaced persons, maintenance of law and order, the facilitation of the free movement of humanitarian assistance, and coordination with African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS) and the U.N. Mission in Sudan (UNMIS). In August, the United Nations made important adjustments to the proposed multidimensional force in a report submitted to the United Nations Security Council. Instead of a United Nations military presence, the European Union (EU) will deploy an estimated 4,000 peacekeeping troops to Chad and CAR. In September 2007, the EU approved the deployment of a peacekeeping force.

¹ <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2006/78725.htm>.

² http://hrw.org/reports/2007/car0907/2.htm#_Toc176766508.

U.S.-CAR Relations

Relations between the United States and CAR are good, although there are areas of serious concerns. The Bush Administration has expressed concerns about poor human rights conditions and lack of political and economic reform by the CAR government. In March 2007, at a hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on Africa, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State James Swan stated that CAR “has a history of violence and unrest. It has experienced four coups, additional failed coup attempts, and many years of undemocratic rule since its independence in 1960. Rebels, including some members of the political opposition, emerged in the northwestern part of the country in late 2005. Still other groups with alleged links to Sudan took over four northeastern towns in October and November 2006.”

The United States closed its embassy in CAR due to security concerns in the mid-1990s and in 2003. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Peace Corps did not return to CAR after the U.S. embassy closed in 1996-1997 and reopened in 1998. In FY2007, the United States provided \$20 million in humanitarian assistance to CAR.

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