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African Union: Concrete action urgently needed to halt atrocities in Central African Republic

The African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council must act urgently and clarify its plans to deploy the new African-led peacekeeping mission to tackle the spiralling human rights and humanitarian crisis in the Central African Republic, Amnesty International said today.

A week has passed since the UN Security Council unanimously authorized the transition of an existing central African states force on the ground to protect civilians into a one-year African-led peacekeeping mission joined by French peacekeepers.

In a letter, Amnesty International has urged the AU Peace and Security Council to break its silence and spell out the concrete action it is taking urgently to put forces on the ground and ensure effective protection of civilians.

“A clear plan and concrete action are urgently needed from the African Union to prevent the crisis in Central African Republic spiralling completely out of control,” said Netsanet Belay, Africa Director at Amnesty International.

“Amnesty International’s team on the ground has witnessed how tens of thousands of civilians are in vital need of the protection the promised African-led peacekeeping force will provide. But with only a week to go until the force begins its mandate, there is a serious lack of clarity about its composition, timeline for deployment and priorities.”

On 5 December the UN Security Council unanimously approved the one-year deployment of troops under an African-led International Support Mission in the Central African Republic (MISCA). African leaders later agreed to expand the force to 6,000 troops, who are due to take over from the existing contingent of peacekeepers from central African states on 19 December.

In a statement issued the day after the UN resolution was adopted, the Chairperson of the Commission of the AU emphasized the “urgent need to do everything necessary to bring this unacceptable situation to an end”.

But just a week before the planned deployment, confusion reigns over which African countries will provide the troops, and when. It is also unclear how they will ensure co-operation with some 1,600 French troops who have also deployed separately to the Central African Republic in the past week.

An Amnesty International team, which has been on the ground in Bangui since last week, has documented a rapidly deteriorating situation as tit-for-tat atrocities are being committed against Muslim and Christian communities alike.

With upwards of 500 people reportedly killed amid inter-communal and sectarian violence, scores of dead

bodies have been piling up at the city's central morgue and mosques. There are also many reports of bodies being buried in people's backyards.

More than 100,000 internally displaced people, too afraid to return to their homes, are living in misery in makeshift camps at some 30 sites around the city, including at Bangui airport. At the airport camp the population swells to more than 40,000 at night, as people seek protection offered by the African and French troops based there.

"Protecting civilians from the ongoing atrocities and ensuring humanitarian assistance gets to those in need are absolute priorities. But it will only be possible if the peacekeeping forces on the ground in the Central African Republic are adequately resourced and the African and French forces have clear guidelines for collaboration," said Netsanet Belay.

Amnesty International noted that the MISCA force has already relied on international assistance to enable its deployment – including a US offer to transport Burundian peacekeeping troops to Bangui.

The organization called on the international community to step up efforts to assist the peacekeepers in their bid to halt the atrocities, protect civilians – including the displaced – and restore law and order.

"Before it's too late to make a difference, the UN Secretary General must speed up his assessment of the peacekeepers' impact on the ground – within weeks, not months. And he must immediately start preparations for the deployment of a robust UN peacekeeping force to step in if and when needed," said Netsanet Belay.