

## **AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT**

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### **CAR: URGENT ACTION NEEDED TO TACKLE ESCALATING VIOLENCE IN THE CENTRAL REGIONS**

Serious human rights abuses are being committed in the Central African Republic (CAR), including killings, mutilation of bodies, abductions, and forced displacement. The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), deployed on 15 September 2014, has not yet been able to stop or prevent most of these abuses. Those responsible, including members of the Séléka, Anti-balaka, and their allies continue to enjoy impunity.

Fresh violence rocked the capital, Bangui, in mid-October. At least a dozen people were killed and thousands were forced to flee their homes and live in camps for internally displaced people (IDPs). Beginning earlier in the month and continuing for weeks, escalating violence by the Séléka, armed Peulhs (members of the Peulh ethnic group), and Anti-balaka in the central region of the country, especially around Bambari, in the Ouaka prefecture, 280 km northeast of Bangui, killed dozens and displaced thousands more.

In a visit carried out in late October 2014, Amnesty International documented recent attacks on civilians in the towns of Dekoa, 260 km north of Bangui and Bambari, and in several villages near Bambari, including Yamalé, Batobadja, Matchika, Tchimanguéré, Gbakomalékpa and Baguela. The mostly Muslim Séléka forces, now split into at least two armed groups, have been clashing with mainly Christian and animist Anti-balaka militia in the region over the past several months. All sides, Séléka, armed Peulhs (members of the Peulh ethnic group, many of which belong to a Séléka spin-off group), and Anti-balaka, are systematically targeting civilians that they believe support the other side's fighters.

On 10 October, the prompt intervention of French forces aided by UN peacekeepers prevented a large-scale massacre in Dekoa. Yet with international forces stretched thin—in part because MINUSCA is still several thousand troops short of its mandated numbers—they have not been able to prevent escalating

violence in the country's central region. Given the enormous challenges posed by conditions in the country, it is likely that only the full deployment of well-trained and equipped MINUSCA troops in all regions, combined with concrete judicial mechanisms to tackle impunity, will stop the cycle of violence.

## **1. Attacks in and around Bambari**

Since May 2014, the town of Bambari, 280 km northeast of Bangui, has seen months of violence and instability. Nearly all of the Christian and animist inhabitants of the town have been displaced, as well as many Christians and animists from nearby villages. While many Muslims still live in their homes in Bambari, many of the Muslim inhabitants of nearby villages have been forced to flee.

Although both French and United Nations forces have a presence in Bambari, most of the town is under the control of the Séléka, and/or a recent Séléka spin-off known as the Union for Peace in Central Africa (UPC)<sup>1</sup>. The Séléka/UPC has established its headquarters in the main court building in Bambari. Groups of armed Séléka/UPC fighters wearing military fatigues are often seen in many other locations around the town.

Some 20,000 people, mostly Christian, are currently living in three camps for internally displaced people in Bambari: next to the MINUSCA base, next to the French military base, and in the Notre-Dame des Victoires Catholic church compound. In addition, a few thousand displaced Muslims are sheltering with host families in the town's Muslim quarter, known as the *Quartier Bornu*.

### ***Killings of displaced Christians by Séléka and armed Muslim youth***

On 1 October 2014, Séléka fighters, together with armed Muslim youth, carried out an attack on internally displaced people's camp next to the MINUSCA base in Bambari (which accommodates Christian and animist displaced people). The attack followed the killing of a Muslim merchant, Abdou Salam Zaiko, in a nearby village; his mutilated body had been brought back to Bambari, upsetting many Muslim inhabitants (see below). According to witnesses, the attack began at about 1 pm, when a crowd of around 70 to 100 people surged toward the camp from the direction of the Quartier Bornu. A large majority of the attackers were wearing civilian clothes. Some were well-armed, carrying grenades and automatic rifles; others carried swords and machetes.

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<sup>1</sup> The Union for Peace in the Central African Republic (UPC) was created on October 25 by some of the Seleka top officials during a general assembly meeting in Bambari. In the announcement creating the party, Captain Ahmad Nedjad, spokesperson of the UPC, specified that its political wing (coordination) is headed by Habib Awal and the military wing by General Ali Djarass.

People in the camp had received phone calls from friends who had seen the mob, telling them that an armed crowd was heading in their direction. Nearly everyone fled to the other end of the camp, many hiding behind buildings. A grenade thrown over the wall into the camp landed near a group of civilians that were gathering their belongings before fleeing, and five people were injured, including a 7-month-old baby, his mother, and an old man.

Most of those who were killed during this attack were living in houses adjacent to the UN military base. An evangelical pastor who survived an attack on his house (which also served as a church) described the scene:

“We locked the house tightly when we heard the Muslims were coming. When they arrived they threatened to shoot the house up and set it on fire. My daughter opened the door and they asked her, ‘where is the pastor?’ They searched all over the house. I was in my bedroom hiding under the bed. They even looked under the bed but somehow they didn’t see me. By the grace of God I was saved.”

A 15-year-old boy named **Banda** who worked for the pastor cleaning the church was caught by the mob and killed. The pastor explained:

“When the mob found him in the house, they set upon him. They cut him up all over with knives and sabers. He didn’t die immediately. He survived long enough for the Red Cross to bring him to the regional hospital. But he died there at 1 am the next morning.”

**Jean-Firmin Balepako**, a 23-year-old man, was killed during the same attack. He and his father lived in a house in the displaced people camp near the MINUSCA base. His father told Amnesty International what happened:

“There were six of us in the house: me, my son, and four women who were friends of the family. The attackers broke down the front door. One of them entered my room, where I was hiding with my son and two of the women, pointed his gun at me and said I was going to die [...]

“The attacker demanded money and my telephone. I told him that I didn’t have anything. He told me to get out, and he pushed me out of the door, pressing his gun into my back. The other attackers yelled at me and the women, telling us to leave. There were about 12 of them, not wearing uniforms, but I recognized some of them as Séléka. Most were quite young, teenagers not adults.

“I stayed not too far from the house, worried for my son, and I heard him screaming. They must have searched him carefully, as I later found his pants on my bed with the pockets pulled out.

“We found his body that night, when the MINUSCA brought us back to the house. His body was about four meters away from the house: his head had been sliced open, his arms cut by swords.”

Another family that was living in an abandoned house in the neighbourhood lost two family members: **Adolfo Wambanede**, 25, and his brother, **Endjiye Wambanede**, 30. Their younger brother said that the two were caught while running away. He told Amnesty International:

“We were running in different directions; they were caught and killed. Adolfo was injured already and couldn’t run. He was decapitated; Endjiye was shot.”

### ***Killings of Muslims by Anti-balaka fighters***

Anti-balaka active in villages near Bambari have carried out a series of killings of Muslim civilians. While the victims were targeted by Anti-balaka fighters because they were Muslim, the attacks also had an economic element: the killings were accompanied by looting and theft.

The attack on the internally displaced people’s camp near the MINUSCA base on 1 October, described above, followed the killing on 29 September of **Abdou Salam Zaiko**, a Muslim civilian from Bambari, by Anti-balaka fighters. Zaiko was travelling with others in his car, which broke down 35 km from Bambari. Sometime after midnight that night, a group of Anti-balaka fighters found the stranded group. They allowed the Christian driver and Christian passengers to leave, but killed Zaiko and at least two other Muslim passengers. When Zaiko’s badly mutilated body was brought back to Bambari, many in the Muslim community were furious and attacked the internally displaced people’s camp in retaliation (see above).

On 8 October, seven Muslim passengers in a car owned by Saidu Daouda were killed by Anti-balaka fighters after the car was ambushed on the road. Daouda, who ran an informal daily transportation service on the Bambari-Ndasima route, described what happened:

“We left Ndasima at 6 am. At about 7:30 am, we arrived at a small stream; the Anti-balaka were waiting for us. They had pulled up the small bridge that crosses the stream, and we couldn’t cross. We tried to turn around but they started shooting, so we all tried to get out and run. I managed to escape, as did some others, but many others didn’t.

“There were 24 people in the car, both Christians and Muslims. Seven people were killed, all Muslim men, and the rest survived. They captured a bunch of

people, both Christians and Muslims, and they let all of the Christians go, including the driver. All of the Muslim men whom they caught were killed. They undressed their bodies to humiliate them, and cut them into pieces, chopping off their hands and feet. They also took everyone's money and phones, and burned my car."

All of the victims—who included **Belo Siddique**, 22, **Omaru Maounde**, 22, and **Ibrahim Ali**, age about 28—were inhabitants of the towns of Bambari and Ndasima.

An Amnesty International researcher viewed a video on mobile phones showing the mutilated corpses, which was allegedly taken by members of the CAR transitional government security forces who visited the site later in the day. The bodies were buried in a mass grave at the site of the attack.

Muslims in Bambari emphasized that because of attacks such as these, they could no longer travel outside of the town. "PK 5 [five kilometres from the town centre] is about the limit for us," one explained. "We're like prisoners here."

### ***Attacks on Peulh cattle herders by Anti-balaka fighters***

Semi-nomadic Peulh herders, who are Muslim and normally live in rural areas with their herds, are especially vulnerable to attack. Six members of a single Peulh family—including two children and a woman—were killed in an Anti-balaka attack on a Peulh encampment near Bambari in late September.

The encampment, called Djimbété, was about 26 km from Bambari. About 15 men, 25 women, and many children lived there. The attack took place in the very early morning, just before dawn, on a Sunday in late September. One of the survivors—who was related to the people who were killed—described what happened:

"The Anti-balaka first invaded a compound of three huts on the edge of the encampment belonging to Bodo. We called him Bodo; his real name was Adamu Bidjingui. We were all on high alert already, and when we heard his family being attacked the rest of us managed to flee.

"We stayed in the bush all night. The next day we returned to the encampment and found all the bodies. Some people had been nearly decapitated; one person's feet had been cut off. We buried them in a common grave.

"They had burned down the entire encampment ... everything, absolutely everything. I lost four huts. They also stole my motorcycle, money and merchandise. After that, we fled the encampment to take shelter in Bambari."

The dead were **Adamu Bidjingui**, age about 35; **Moussa** (Adamu's brother), age about 20; **Bouba** (another brother), age about 18; **Idrissa** (Adamu's son), age about 15; an old woman who was visiting the family, and Adamu's six-year-old son.

### ***Attacks on civilian Christians by armed Peulhs around Bambari***

Armed Muslim Peulh fighters have carried out an extensive string of recent attacks on villages near Bambari, some in the direction of the town of Bakala, and others in the direction of Alindao town. Among the villages they have targeted are Yamalé, Batobadja, Matchika, Tchimanguéré, Gbakomalékpa and Baguela.

An Amnesty International researcher who visited the area saw the fresh grave of two victims just outside of the village of Tchimanguéré, on the Bambari-Grimari road, and obtained the names of 16 other victims who were killed by the armed Peulhs. The MINUSCA has estimated that at least 30 people were killed in recent attacks around Bambari.

The attacks on the Bambari-Bakala area took place over several days, beginning on 20 October, with the attack on Yamalé, and continued until Saturday, 25 October, with an early morning attack on Tchimanguéré. The attacks on villages in the direction of Alindao—such as those of Batobadja and Matchika—took place approximately a week earlier. Many of the dead were not living in the villages themselves, but in more ad hoc shelters away from the main roads.

All of the attacks—which villagers believe have been committed by men belonging to the newly-created UPC—have followed a similar pattern. Well-armed attackers, generally wearing uniforms and carrying a range of arms including automatic rifles, rocket launchers, and swords, arrived at villages shooting in the air and yelling.

“When the attackers arrive in the village, often via motorcycle, they break into all the houses and take everything,” said one survivor. “They take money, food, phones, even goats and chickens.”

Sometimes the attackers allowed the village's inhabitants to flee, particularly women and children, while they targeted young men. In some cases they have taken hostages, over 20 of which were reportedly rescued by French and UN troops last week.

One former hostage, a young man from Yamalé, told Amnesty International that the armed Peulhs who were holding him told him that Yamalé was really a “Peulh village,” and that he and his people did not belong there.

## **2. Red October in Dekoa: Séléka killings of Christians at internally displaced people's camp**

The town of Dekoa, 260 km north of Bangui, was nearly deserted when an Amnesty International team visited it on 24 October. The entire Christian and animist population of the town had been displaced, with about 1,700 people living in the Catholic Church compound (transformed into an internally displaced people's camp), and many more living in the bush. Séléka attacks on civilians in nearby villages, often in blind retaliation for Anti-balaka attacks, had led to widespread fear and anger among the population.

According to the local imam, most of the town's Muslims had fled months ago, going to Kaga-Bandoro and other towns further to the east. Out of a previous population of some 1,059 Muslims (roughly 10 percent of the population), only 63 Muslims remained, most of them men. The remaining Muslims have almost no freedom of movement. They live in a very small area where they are protected against Anti-balaka attacks by French troops.

"We're complete prisoners," the town's imam told Amnesty International. "We stay close together and hardly move."

Muslim civilians in all of the nearby villages, such as Mala, Daya, and Guiffa, have been forced to flee for their lives; some have been killed during Anti-balaka attacks.

At the time of the 10 October attack, an array of different military forces were based in the town. There was a contingent of about 75 or 80 Séléka troops; a MINUSCA contingent; and a contingent of French troops.

The Séléka forces in Dekoa had long maintained a hostile and threatening attitude toward the displaced people hosted at the Catholic Church compound. The Séléka colonel also accused the priests at the church of being accomplices of the Anti-balaka, and even of financing and protecting them. On a few occasions, he had threatened people at the compound and demanded that the displaced people camp be disbanded.

The 10 October attack seems to have been a longstanding premeditated effort to wipe out the displaced people camp situated in the compound of the local Catholic Church. Because a small contingent of MINUSCA troops were based at the main gate of the compound, the Séléka attacked from a different entrance at the back. They shot a young man and people began to panic, many running to the main residential building in the compound to take shelter behind masonry walls.

Hundreds of people crowded into the various rooms of the building; many estimated that there were well over 1,000 people in all. A Brazilian priest, Father Everaldo de Souza, was in an outdoor hallway trying to help people get inside. He tried to reason with the colonel, who was leading the attack, saying, "please don't shoot; there are women and children inside." The colonel knocked the priest down with his automatic rifle.

The priest described the scene:

"They started shooting, and a bullet hit one of the people I was trying to get inside. They began throwing grenades in the hallway; several people were seriously injured and a woman was killed. They were shooting wildly; it was terrifying; people were screaming.

"The Séléka troops circled the house, yelling 'come out, come out!' People refused to open the doors to the house and the Séléka tried to break in, but because people had put tables in front of the door they couldn't. By that time I was hiding in my room and I called the Sangaris [the French troops]. One group of Séléka was going door to door opening the bedrooms; another group backed away from the building and began shooting directly into the living room, where hundreds of people were hiding. It was a slaughter.

"We could have all been killed but just at that moment the French troops arrived, and the Séléka had to turn to shoot at them. The French tried to engage the Séléka under the trees, away from the buildings. It was an enormous combat, lasting an hour or so. At least six Séléka were killed, including the colonel who led the attack."

When the combat was over, most of the surviving Séléka fled into the bush, although at least one was reportedly taken into custody by French troops. (Amnesty International is not aware of whether this person remains in custody or was later released). The fleeing Séléka, who villagers believe were headed to Kaga-Bandoro, killed five people as they escaped into the bush, and took two more as "guides." Those two have not been heard from since.

Nine civilians were killed in the Catholic Church compound during the attack. Some died immediately; a few died within hours, and a few died at the hospital in Kaga-Bandoro where they were evacuated. Several people were seriously injured. Unfortunately due to the lack of security, the evacuation did not occur until 48 hours after the attack took place.

Those killed included three women and four children, the youngest of whom, **Josias Gonda**, was less than two years old. One of the dead women, **Judith Nzaya**, was six months' pregnant. She died in the hospital in Kaga-Bandoro.

A survivor of the attack told Amnesty International how his wife **Huguette Kenguena**, and son, Josias, were killed in front of his eyes:

"The priest told the Séléka not to shoot, that there were women inside. When they knocked him down, they started shooting. My wife, Huguette Kenguena, was shot in the back. My baby son was shot in the head. When I saw them I wanted to die myself."

Survivors said that the Séléka unit was heavily armed, with Kalashnikovs, other kinds of rifles, and grenades. "They wanted to kill everyone," one person said. "We were lucky to survive."

## **Background**

Violence continued in many areas of the Central African Republic despite the deployment of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), on 15 September 2014, and the presence of French forces (known as Sangaris) and European Union forces (EUFOR). Although international forces have been crucial in reducing the level of violence and saving lives, deadly attacks by the Séléka, armed Peulhs, and Anti-balaka continue, including attacks against unarmed civilians at internally displaced people's camps.

Since 7 October, a series of violent incidents have rocked Bangui, with MINUSCA forces facing protests and attacks. On 9 October 2014, a MINUSCA convoy was attacked on the outskirts of Bangui, leaving one peacekeeper dead, another severely wounded, and seven others injured. Sporadic clashes between Anti-balaka fighters and international forces, including EUFOR, continue.

According to UNHCR, the October 2014 wave of violence displaced some 6,500 people in Bangui alone, but that number could be much higher. In all, there are currently some 410,000 internally displaced people in the country, including over 60,000 in 34 sites in Bangui. Around 420,000 CAR refugees had fled to neighbouring countries.