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Central African Republic: UN must not let peacekeepers fail

The international community must give peacekeepers in the Central African Republic all the means necessary to protect civilians or risk an escalation in atrocities that could spill over to neighbouring countries, Amnesty International warned as the UN Security Council authorized deployment of an African Union (AU) force.

The UN vote – which came just hours after clashes erupted overnight in the capital Bangui – authorizes deployment of AU and French troops to protect civilians, restore law and order and end the spiralling human rights violations and abuses.

“The lives of hundreds of thousands of civilians hang in the balance, made brutally clear by these attacks on the capital. The international community must do everything in its power to ensure these troops can effectively protect civilians and restore order to the Central African Republic,” said Salil Shetty, Secretary General of Amnesty International.

“The African Union and other sub-regional bodies must press countries to contribute troops and equipment. Other international organizations and donors must throw their full weight and resources behind the effort to restore the rule of law and protect human rights. Failure is not an option.”

On 19 December 2013 up to 3,500 AU troops – some of which are already on the ground – are expected to begin operating as the African-led International Support Mission in the Central African Republic (MISCA). They will be bolstered by up to 1,200 troops being deployed as part of a separate French military intervention as authorized today by the Security Council.

MISCA’s one-year mandate means that a fully fledged UN peacekeeping mission is off the table for now. The Security Council is due to review its performance after six months.

“Given the extreme urgency of the situation facing the Central African Republic, six months is far too long to wait to assess the mission’s progress. The UN should urgently gear up to transform it into a robust UN peacekeeping operation, with all the resources needed to turn this dire situation around,” said Shetty.

Amnesty International has repeatedly voiced concern over how slow progress towards a robust peacekeeping effort has contributed to serious ongoing human rights violations and abuses in Central African Republic.

The UN Secretary-General has said that up to 9,000 peacekeepers could be needed to restore law and order in the country, and has set up a trust fund for donor countries to help to finance MISCA.

In addition to the deployment of troops, the Security Council resolution calls for the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of all armed groups in the Central African Republic. It also urges an end to the recruitment and use of child soldiers, and for any former child soldiers to be reunited with their families. And it imposes a one-year international arms embargo on the country.

Amnesty International called on all countries to cooperate with these initiatives.

The organization also called on the UN Security Council to ensure that an international commission of inquiry – also established by the resolution – is adequately resourced to conduct its investigations into human rights violations. States are permitted to bring to justice anyone suspected of crimes under international law or gross human rights violations committed in the Central African Republic.

The AU's Peace and Security Council pushed for an African-led peacekeeping mission in July, as the security situation deteriorated following the ousting of President François Bozizé in March.

Since then, the violence has displaced upwards of 400,000 people and taken on an inter-religious aspect in some parts of the country. The situation has continued to worsen amid a security vacuum created when the Seleka coalition of armed groups disbanded by order of the transitional authorities.

“The African Union has voiced its concern over the crisis in Central African Republic in the past. With the country slipping deeper into chaos, now is the time for words to be matched by action. AU member states from across the continent must urgently and fully commit to the peacekeeping effort in a bid to stop mass atrocities before the violence spreads further,” said Shetty.

Amnesty International is closely monitoring the ongoing human rights situation in the run-up to the MISCA forces' deployment, with a team currently on the ground.