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Central African Republic: International community must ensure effective protection of civilians

The civilian population of the Central African Republic is in urgent need of protection, Amnesty International said today from the capital Bangui, four days into the worst spate of violence in the conflict to date.

The organization has seen scores of dead bodies in the city's central morgue and visited some of the many sites where an estimated 60,000 people have sought refuge across Bangui. Similar scenes are reportedly playing out in Bossangoa and elsewhere in the country.

“The high number of people fleeing their homes in search of a safe refuge attests to the widespread fear and deep insecurity that has spread across Bangui neighbourhoods,” said Christian Mukosa, Amnesty International’s Central Africa expert, currently in Bangui.

The number of people seeking sanctuary at these sites increases at night when even more people leave their homes to hide in church compounds and other perceived areas of safety, as the likelihood of attack is higher in their areas.

Even in these camps, the provision of security is far from sufficient. Displaced people report that the de facto government forces, known as ex-Seleka, are carrying out sporadic attacks on camps and in neighbouring areas.

In one camp visited by Amnesty International an estimated 3,000 people had taken refuge around the church, which had only a handful of African peacekeepers stationed at the gate to protect them.

“Certain parts of Bangui are extremely vulnerable to attack and need urgent and adequate physical protection,” said Christian Mukosa.

“This includes the hospitals, particularly if a repeat of what happened at the Hôpital de l’Amitié – where Seleka forces are reported to have pulled at least 10 men from the hospital and shot them – is to be prevented.”

The French troops have been mostly welcomed by people in Bangui, and their arrival is believed to have prevented even greater bloodshed. They are carrying out patrols across the city, including foot patrols.

The Multinational Force of Central Africa (FOMAC), made up of peacekeeping troops from neighbouring African countries, is also playing an important protection role in some locations in the capital Bangui and other parts of the country, though many people interviewed in the capital mistrust its Chadian contingent for its perceived sympathies with the ex-Seleka forces.

The official count of the dead in Bangui from last week’s explosion of violence is now more than 400, but

it is estimated that up to 1,000 people may have been killed in the days of violence since 5 December. The true number of the dead may never be known.

According to numerous testimonies, many bodies were buried in the neighbourhoods where they were killed, and were never formally counted. Amnesty International visited three backyard burial sites on 8 December in Bangui's Castors neighbourhood.

Amnesty International has also received information about different kind of weapons proliferating within communities where people feel a desperate need to protect themselves. These include fire arms and grenades as well as machetes and other more basic instruments.

The organization said a disarmament initiative started by French troops on Monday is a much needed step to stop the violence between armed groups, but one which will be difficult to implement.

“The violence has caused a deep anger across the Central African Republic with each group blaming the other for what has happened. While there can be no quick-fix for the current crisis, which has been building up for years, peacekeepers can help by prioritizing protection of vulnerable sites and groups of civilians,” said Christian Mukosa.

“They must work towards the goal of enabling people to return safely to their homes and to live there in security without fear of reprisal or attack. This can not happen without adequate protection and sufficient resources.”