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## **Peace keeping forces, the only way to avert a catastrophe in the Central African Republic**

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Nearly half a million people forced to flee their homes, more than one million in desperate need of food, thousands abused, raped and executed, hundreds of children forcibly recruited to fight.

The world has not hesitated to call what is taking place in the Central African Republic a "looming human catastrophe", "complete chaos" and "suffering beyond imagination" in this country of 4.6 million people.

But what has been missing is effective international action to protect civilians and prevent a human rights catastrophe with consequences far beyond the Central African Republic.

At present there are only 2,500 soldiers from an African-Led International Support Mission trying to keep the peace in the country. The reality on the ground is stark. In the north-western of Bossangoa, 40,000 people are holed up in a Catholic mission. There are only a handful of poorly equipped soldiers protecting them from imminent attack.

Close by in Bouca more than 2,000 people, who have fled violence, are in a similar situation.

The numbers are spine-chilling, terrifying, but they only tell half of the story.

Behind each statistic there is a name, a face, a life. Someone's mother, sister, son or daughter all clinging to life while the world tries to figure out what to do.

In a bid to control the situation, the UN Security Council is currently debating the issue.

This week, the Security Council is expected to give French and African Union troops on the ground an initial mandate to rein in the security forces and armed groups responsible for spiralling human rights violations and abuses. But a full-fledged UN peacekeeping operation may be necessary to overcome the current crisis.

In the long run the deployment of a robust UN peacekeeping force is the only option to ensure civilians are protected and give the Central African Republic a chance to overcome this dark chapter of its history.

Failing to take concerted action will only condemn the country to become a failed state – with all the unthinkable consequences that would bring to its people and the wider region. Waiting will only compound the suffering and diminish the prospects for success of a peacekeeping mission.

In addition to a peacekeeping mission, an arms embargo must be put in place.

People in the Central African Republic have been suffering, largely away from public view for nearly a year, when in December 2012, a coalition of armed groups called Seleka launched an offensive against former President Francois Bozizé.

The country has a tragic history of human rights violations and abuses – including unlawful killings, sexual violence and recruitment of child soldiers -- at the hands of successive governments and armed groups. Most were never investigated.

Since Seleka seized power in March 2013, violence by their fighters and armed opposition groups has spiralled out of control in what has now become a largely lawless country.

The clashes between the Muslim minority currently in power and the Christian majority are only expected to continue to escalate.

The proliferation of small arms only makes matters worse. Up to 20,000 former Seleka fighters, as well as other armed groups, have easy access to weaponry. Even in the capital Bangui, daytime attacks by armed groups, including killings by former Seleka fighters and current members of the security forces, are increasingly common.

But the situation is hardly surprising. For years, Amnesty International has been documenting the volatile human rights situation in the country. In fact, last October, we warned of the looming crisis in a report that documented the unprecedented scale of human rights violations committed across the Central African Republic since Seleka took power.

In early November, we published satellite images that showed, in full colour, hundreds of houses burned to the ground, leading to mass displacement.

No one is being held to account for what happened or for what is happening now. Impunity is the law of the land.

What we are seeing in the Central African Republic today is a catastrophic situation descending into complete chaos. Even as you read this, people are being killed, women raped and children forcibly recruited to fight.

The decision world leaders will have to make will not be an easy one, but it is the only one. It will take courage and determination not to turn a blind eye to this unfolding tragedy.

Men, women and children in the Central African Republic are staring into the abyss with the potential for mass slaughter of civilians.

The world must act now. People cannot afford any more delays.