

Central African Republic

War against children in the wild north

'She lost weight and became very shy when she returned home'

Ousmane Bi Yunusa, father of a nine-year-old girl who was abducted by armed bandits and returned only after a ransom was paid

Children live in peril in the northern Central African Republic (CAR). In the ongoing armed conflict there, children have been abducted by armed bandits locally known as *Zaraguinas* or *coupeurs de route* (highway bandits). Most of the abducted children are from the Mbororo (Peulh) ethnic group, a nomadic cattle-rearing people who live in several countries in central and western Africa. Many Mbororo refugees from the CAR are currently living in camps run by UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, in southern Chad. Most fled their home country because of the conflict ravaging the northern CAR and the pervasive practice of child abduction for ransom.

"Last time Karim was kidnapped with 50 other children from my village [Bata village, Bozoum], every parent was forced to pay a huge amount of money before the Zaraguinas released their children."

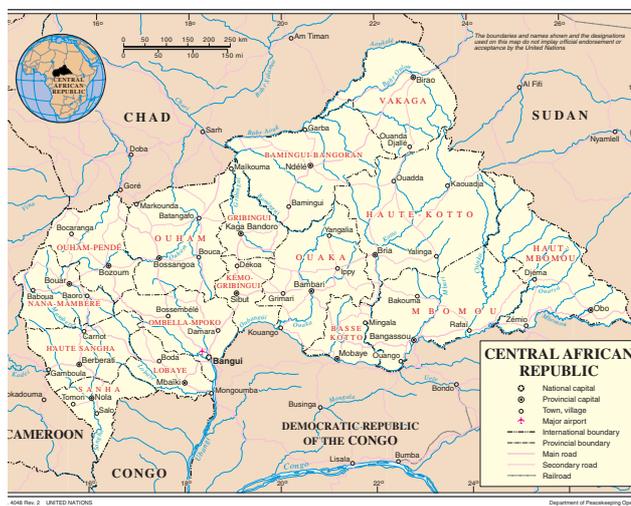
Buba Djafun, Karim Buba's father

Children are usually abducted when they are looking after the family cattle in the bush near their villages. Sometimes they are taken from their homes in the villages. Children are released after their family members or relatives pay heavy ransoms, often leaving their families destitute.

Some of the children abducted are reported to have been killed by the bandits after their families failed to pay the demanded ransom. Seven-year-old Ibrahim Garga was shot dead after his family failed to pay a ransom of 6 million

CFA francs (US\$12,000). His father paid around 3 million CFA francs (US\$6,000). Nevertheless, the bandits killed his son because the father could not find the rest of the money.

Virtually no action has been taken by the government or the international community to prevent these abductions or to protect children. This failure by the state and the international community has resulted in a situation where the children's right to life, health, security of the person and dignity are routinely violated with impunity.



The abduction of Mbororo children

Most of the victims of abduction appear to be members of the Mbororo ethnic group. They are regularly targeted by the *Zaraguinas* because their parents or relatives own cows which they are forced to sell to pay the ransoms. These bandits target young children because they are easy to control and less likely to plan an escape. Most of the abducted children are young boys because they are traditionally responsible for looking after the family cattle.

"The Zaraguinas [usually] know the family of the kidnapped children. They attack the families they know will have money."

Damsi Ibrahim, father of a former abducted child

Young girls targeted by the *Zaraguinas*

Some of the abducted children are young girls. They are often abducted from their homes or from the bush while looking after the family cattle. Girls are responsible for looking after the cattle in families with no sons or with very young sons.

Sixteen-year-old Fatimatou Adamou was abducted in May 2005 and released after her father paid 500,000 CFA francs (US\$1,000). Sisters Amina Bi Yunusa, aged nine, and Fatimatou Bi Yunusa, aged five, were abducted in October 2006 and January 2007 respectively. They were released after their father paid a total of 430,000 CFA francs (US\$860). Ten-year-old Ali Bouba was abducted several times in 2004, 2005 and 2006 and his family paid at least 2 million CFA francs (US\$4,000) in ransom.

Girls have also been raped during attacks on their villages by armed men. In May 2006, a 13-year-old girl and at least two others were raped during an attack on the village of Bemaide near Bekoto.

Some abducted girls and women spend long periods in captivity. Ndewa Biba, aged 24, was abducted in February 2007 and was still being held by the *Zaraguinas* in May. There has been no news of her since.

According to most of the parents of abducted girls, *Zaraguinas* do not rape them or subject them to other forms of sexual violence. However, this may be because they fear the resulting social stigma if they report rape.

Ransoms forcing families into poverty

Repeated abductions and payment of large ransoms, in addition to armed conflict and widespread insecurity, have forced thousands of families to flee to southern Chad where they live in refugee camps. Those who fail to cross the border live in precarious conditions in the bush.

Some children have been abducted more than 10 times, and each time families have raised the ransom by selling their cattle, leaving them without their main source of income. Djafun Buba paid 5 million CFA francs (US\$ 10,000) for the return of his children who were abducted several times between 2005 and early 2007. The family is now living in a refugee camp in southern Chad.



Amina Bi Yunusa and Fatimatou Bi Yunusa

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The CAR government fails to protect the people

By its inaction, the government of the CAR has failed in its obligations to protect the country's citizens. Even when informed of attacks by the *Zaraguinas*, CAR security forces present in the area often refuse to intervene, leaving families without protection.

When his nine-year-old daughter Loussoufa was abducted in 2006 for 35 days, Adamou Bi Babayo contacted the CAR soldiers at the nearby military base in Paoua but they refused to intervene. He was forced to pay a ransom of 1 million CFA francs (US\$2,000) to free his daughter.

The CAR's obligations to protect its citizens

Despite its constitutional and international human rights obligations, the government of the CAR has failed to protect the country's population. Even in a situation of armed conflict, the CAR government has a duty to protect all those in the country. Similarly, all parties to an armed conflict have a responsibility to take all feasible measures to ensure the protection of civilians.



Karim Buba

Responsibility to protect – the role of the international community

'It is a basic need of children to be protected when conflicts threaten and such protection requires the fulfilment of their rights through the implementation of international human rights and humanitarian law.'

Impact of Armed Conflict on Children, paragraph 204, note by the UN Secretary-General, 26 August 1996

Following the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1778 (2007), which approved the deployment of a multidimensional presence in Chad and the CAR, the European Union decided on 15 October 2007 to conduct a military operation in eastern Chad and north-eastern CAR. This resolution authorizes the protection of refugees, displaced people and other civilians in danger.

It is crucial that this international presence is quickly and effectively deployed in the northern CAR to protect civilians.

In addition, the UN Security Council reaffirmed in its 1674 (2006) Resolution the responsibility of the international community, through the UN, to help to protect the population from serious human rights abuses.

Urgent action needed

Please write to the CAR authorities, calling on them to:

- ▶ Deploy security officers in the north with clear instructions to protect civilians, especially children;
- ▶ Co-operate effectively in the establishment and deployment of the UN Mission in the Central African Republic and Chad (MINURCAT) and the European Union military bridging operation in Eastern Chad and North-Eastern Central African Republic (EUFOR Tchad/RCA) according to their mandate, and secure their prompt deployment in all parts of the northern CAR;
- ▶ Create an environment for displaced children in which they can enjoy their basic rights.

- ▶ Investigate reports of child abduction and bring those responsible to justice;
- ▶ Investigate and bring to justice those members of the CAR forces who have refused to intervene to rescue abducted children.

Please send your appeals to:

Son Excellence M. François Bozizé
Président de la République
Palais de la Renaissance
Bangui
République Centrafricaine
Fax: +236 05 56 20
Salutation: Your Excellency

Please write to the UN Security Council, calling on it to:

- ▶ Promptly start the deployment of the MINURCAT and allocate resources to the mission to use all means necessary, in full compliance with international human rights and humanitarian law, to protect children and other civilians at risk in all parts of the northern CAR;
- ▶ Ensure that the multidimensional operation takes into consideration the situation of children and helps to prevent abductions and other abuses against them.

Please send your appeals, during November 2007, to:

Ambassador Dr R.M. Marty M. Natalegawa
Fax: +1 212 972 9780
Email: ptri@indonesiamission-ny.org
Salutation: Your Excellency

Please send your appeals, during December 2007, to:

Ambassador Marcello Spatafora
Fax: +1 212 486 1036
Email: info.italyun@esteri.it
Salutation: Your Excellency
If you are sending appeals after the end of December 2007, please check the UN Security Council website:
www.un.org/Docs/sc/

Please write to UNICEF, the UN Children's Fund, calling on it to:

- ▶ Formulate and implement, in conjunction with the government of the CAR and civil society organizations, a detailed action plan to protect children from abduction and other forms of violence;
- ▶ Reinforce the presence of child protection experts in the northern CAR and develop local and regional mechanisms to prevent and protect children from abductions;

- ▶ Take measures to provide abducted children with access to medical treatment, including psychological support, and ensure that internally displaced children and refugee children from the CAR enjoy their basic rights.

Please send your appeals to:

Ann M. Veneman
Executive Director
Fax: +1 212 887 7465
Email: information@unicefusa.org
Salutation: Dear Executive Director

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We research, campaign, advocate and mobilize to end all abuses of human rights – civil, political, social, cultural and economic. From freedom of expression and association to physical and mental integrity, from protection from discrimination to the right to shelter – these rights are indivisible.

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