

France and the Militarization of Central Africa: Thousands of Muslims Fleeing the Central African Republic

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Unrest is continuing in the mineral-rich state of the Central African Republic as French and African Union (AU) peacekeeping troops are patrolling the capital of Bangui and other areas. France has announced that it will be deploying an additional 400 troops to its former colony.

Also the European Union (EU) has committed to sending in 1,000 of its soldiers as attacks against Muslims are resulting in more injuries and deaths. Tens of thousands of people in the Islamic community have fled the country or re-located to internally displaced persons camps.

The government of interim President Catherine Samba-Panza has pledged to put a halt to the targeted violence against Muslims. Several leaders of the anti-Balaka militias have been arrested.

According to the Associated Press

“Officials in Central African Republic say 11 men including leaders of the Christian anti-Balaka militia have been transferred to the capital’s main prison.

The men were detained during a disarmament program Saturday.” (February 17)

This article continues saying “They are the first prisoners taken into custody by the government of transitional President Catherine Samba-Panza. Justice Minister Isabelle Gaudeville declined to name the suspects or specify the allegations against them. But Jean-Pierre Sadou of the African peacekeeping mission said they included multiple anti-Balaka leaders.”

The anti-Balaka militias grew up among the majority Christian population in the CAR in response to atrocities committed by the Muslim-dominated Seleka Coalition which seized power in March 2013. Seleka was led by Michel Djotodia, who served as interim president from March 2013 to January of this year.

Djotodia was forced from office due to external pressure from France and Chad. A regional summit was convened in N’Djamena which resulted in the removal of the interim regime headed by Seleka.

Muslims Halted Seeking to Leave the Fighting

Tens of thousands of Muslims are being forced out of the CAR. Some of these residents are nationals of Chad and Sudan but others are citizens of the country.

Muslims inside the CAR are heavily involved in trade. As a result of these attacks the economic situation inside the country is worsening because of the looting of shops and the shortages of food and consumer goods.

An article in the Economist quoted a CAR citizen saying that “Traders have mostly left as there is little security at the markets. The cattle-herders have fled to the bush so there is very little meat, making it extremely expensive for us to buy. With few means of making money, we are in trouble,” said Elodie Nguerele, a Christian who teaches in Bangui, the capital. (Feb. 15)

This same report also notes that “Less than a quarter of the wholesalers who import food from neighboring countries remain in Bangui, according to aid agencies. Attacks on Muslims may encourage the rest to flee. Residents in Bangui say that supplies of sugar and flour are critically short. The prices for staples are soaring. According to the UN, 1.3m of the country’s 4.6m people need food aid urgently.”

On February 14, hundreds of Muslims in car caravans sought to leave the capital of Bangui but were halted by anti-Balaka forces threatening to kill them. African peacekeeping forces from Burundi ordered the convoy back to local mosques fearing further clashes that would lead to more injuries and deaths.

Mass graves have been uncovered in the capital and other regions of the country. Estimates of deaths in the fighting since January are more than 1,000.

AU member-states have contributed to the peacekeeping mission for the CAR known as MISCA. In early February it was announced that over \$300 million had been pledged to aid the operation.

Nonetheless, the tensions within the country remain extremely high. The process of transporting people through the CAR to neighboring Chad and Cameroun is a very dangerous task.

In the Bangui neighborhood of Miskine, Muslims were threatened in their efforts to leave the capital. Mosques have become safe-havens for the minority Islamic community that only makes up 15 percent of the overall population of less than five million in the CAR.

Lieutenant Rosana Nsengimana, of the African peacekeeping force Misca, said: “The convoy escorted by Burundian forces returned to its departure point because of a problem in a neighborhood on the north end of the city where the Muslims would have had to pass through.” There have been reports of people killed based upon rumors and suspicions. (Guardian, UK, Feb. 14)

In a village in the northwest of the country, an official of Amnesty International (AI) reported that widespread targeting of Muslims had resulted in the burning of homes and the killing of civilians including children. These ongoing attacks have not built faith in the French and African military occupation forces that are said to be acting as peacekeepers.

According to AI senior adviser Donatella Rovera, “All the houses of the Muslim population

had been burned or looted and in one of the houses I found a little girl of about 11. She was the only Muslim survivor of the village: the others had either fled or been killed. She was crouching in a corner. She had been hiding there since the day of the massacre. She had not eaten or drunk anything. She was terrified and could not stand at all.” (Guardian, Feb. 14)

The article goes on reporting that “She said her father had been killed and her mother had been killed. She was not speaking very much. There had not been any peacekeepers there at all even though this place was a place that had already seen confrontation between anti-balaka and Seleka forces earlier.”

French, EU and African Troops Are Proving to be Ineffective

Although the EU says that it is sending in 1,000 troops and France will escalate its presence to 2,000, the situation is not improving for the Muslim population or others in the CAR. The inability of the interim government of President Samba-Panza to re-organize the armed forces and the police is reflective of the political vacuum prevailing for nearly a year.

France is increasing its military presence in various African states including Mali, where they have had troops for over a year in the north of the country. Although Paris claimed that its invasion of Mali would only last for few months, more than a thousand troops remain in an ostensible anti-terrorism operation.

Both Mali and the CAR have significant deposits of diamonds, gold and uranium. In Niger, a major source of uranium, the West African state is also being occupied by the Pentagon and French troops since the mines there are being controlled by a firm based in Paris, Areva.

In Libya, where French bombers carried out attacks against the former government of Col. Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, the political and security situation is highly precarious. In January loyalist forces took control of several towns in the southern Libya and hoisted the green flag of the Jamahiriya under Gaddafi.

France recently suggested that it was prepared to establish a “security zone” in southern Libya. However, the foreign ministry soon withdrew this claim.

French public opinion is growing strongly in opposition to its neo-colonial adventures in Africa. The United States is supporting these efforts in Mali, the CAR and Libya, where the Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) along with NATO coordinated the overthrow and destruction of the Gaddafi government in 2011.

These imperialist interventions in Africa will not bring peace and security, in fact they have done just the opposite. In Mali, the intervention of the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) through training programs and direct monetary support to soldiers, led to a military coup in March 2012.

Other European imperialist states such as Germany are being prodding to enter the CAR as well. A recent editorial in Deutsche Welle, the state-controlled media service, called for greater involvement from the government of Angela Merkel.

Only when Africa establishes its own independent military command can these internal conflicts be effectively contained and halted. The ongoing imperialist system of neo-colonialism continues to render the AU to a subordinate role in resolving the economic, social and security crises that are mounting on the continent.

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