

Seleka Rebels Form New Government in the Central African Republic

France deploys additional troops while leader consolidates power

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Michel Djotodia, the leader of the Seleka Coalition, which seized power in the Central African Republic of Bangui on March 24, has established a new government largely composed of opposition figures. Francois Bozize, who was ousted in the military coup, has fled the country and is reported to be in the West African state of Cameroon.

One key opposition leader, Nicolas Tiangaye, is the prime minister, while Djotodia has also named himself as minister of defense in addition to president. Tiangaye was initially named prime minister in January when negotiations between Seleka and the Bozize government resulted in a peace accord that was supposed to have created a coalition regime.

However, by March, the Seleka rebels were accusing the Bozize government of not implementing the peace agreement. Rebels began to seize key towns and cities creating panic inside of Bangui.

Djotodia immediately suspended the constitution upon taking Bangui and reappointed Tiangaye as the prime minister. Within the new government, there are at least nine members of the Seleka group along with eight others from opposition parties. Only one portfolio was given to a figure associated with the Bozize government.

Djotodia was born in the northeast region of the country at Vakaga. He is Islamic, the first Muslim leader of the country since it gained independence from France in 1960.

Only 15 percent of the CAR population is Muslim. The majority of the country's population is Christian.

Djotodia studied in the former Soviet Union and is fluent in Russian. He reportedly lived in the Soviet Union for a decade where he married and had children.

The new leader served as a diplomat for the CAR in Sudan. He was the president of the Union of Democratic Forces for Unity and the Patriotic Action Group for the Liberation of the Central African Republic.

During 2006, while living in Benin, he was arrested by the authorities along with his spokesman Abakar Sabon. They were held for over a year and released in February 2008 after they decided to join peace talks over the future of the CAR.

Despite claims by Djotodia and the Seleka rebels that they are concerned about the welfare

of the people of the CAR and the eradication of corruption, there is no way of knowing whether their presence will improve conditions inside the country. Both Bozize and Djotodia have looked to France and the European Union for assistance.

Bozize had requested the intervention of France to halt the rebel advance. Djotodia has said that he will rely on the EU for the rebuilding of the country.

France enhanced its presence inside the CAR on the eve of the seizure of power by Seleka. There are 500 French troops reportedly stationed at the airport outside the capital.

The London-based Chatham House, an institute that studies international affairs, reported that the actions of Seleka were based purely on ambition. Alex Vines of the African program at Chatham House, said that "All accounts of Seleka are that they have no development vision for CAR. It's exclusively about redistribution of patrimony from having captured the state." (Associated Press, April 1)

South African Debate Over Death of Soldiers

At least 13 South African National Defense Forces (SANDF) soldiers were killed in the CAR on March 23 when they attempted to defend the capital from invading Seleka forces. The South Africans were inside the country as part of a peacekeeping operation mandated by the African Union and the regional Economic Community of Central African States.

Subsequent reports issued by the African National Congress (ANC) government of President Jacob Zuma indicated that some 200 SANDF troops fought over 3,000 rebels. The deaths of the SANDF forces in the CAR have sparked debates inside the parliament in South Africa.

The South African Sunday Times and the City Press have carried interviews with SANDF troops which stated that child soldiers were part of the rebel forces during the battle on March 23. The soldiers spoke to these issues on conditions of anonymity reporting that children were killed in the clashes.

The opposition Democratic Alliance (DA) has called for an investigation of the incident and has made allegations that the ANC government had deployed troops to the CAR to protect mining interests. The ANC has rejected these allegations and threatened legal action against the DA.

In a statement issued by the ANC on April 1, it said that the Mail & Guardian newspaper engaged in malicious reporting that was

"calculated to damage the image of the ANC and to sow distrust in noble decisions of the South African government that derive from public and transparent policies. ...

What is most disturbing with the accusation are blatant lies that suggest that a company linked to the ANC has business interest in CAR. We have established that the said company has no business activity in CAR. While their accusation is false, we believe South Africans have a right to do business anywhere in the world including the continent of Africa." (Mail & Guardian, April 1)

The seizure of power by rebels in the CAR is following a worrisome trend on the continent where coups have taken place in Mali and Guinea-Bissau over the last year. In Mali, a coup

led by a Pentagon-trained officer resulted in further instability in the north of the country and the intervention of France and other imperialist states inside the West African state.

In neighboring Niger, the U.S. has established a drone station and is deploying hundreds of Special Forces. The dispatching of troops to Niger is part of a broader policy which will see the presence of 3,500 more U.S. troops on the African continent in an effort designed to ostensibly "fight terrorism and piracy."

The U.S., Canada and other European states have mining interests in the CAR. The country produces diamonds, gold, copper, iron ore, manganese uranium and graphite.

Despite the mining interests most people earn their livelihood through small scale farming. The people largely remain poor despite increased mining activities inside the country.

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