

III. Armed conflict and peace processes in Central Africa

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The African Development Bank defines Central Africa as Cameroon, the Central African Republic (CAR), Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon.¹ For the purpose of this chapter Burundi is also considered to be part of Central Africa. Although five Central African states were involved in armed conflicts in 2019—Burundi, Cameroon, the CAR, Chad and the DRC—the armed conflicts in Cameroon and Chad were discussed in section II as part of the Lake Chad region. In this section the focus is on the long-running armed conflicts in the CAR and the DRC. In the CAR the main challenge was in implementing a new February 2019 peace agreement between the government and armed groups, while in the DRC a period of political transition was accompanied by increasing insecurity and political violence in the eastern provinces and an ongoing health emergency from the measles and Ebola outbreaks.

Burundi

Burundi is one of the world's poorest nations and the scene of one of Africa's most intractable ethnic-based civil wars (1993–2005). A new wave of violence, political unrest and human rights violations commenced in 2015 (resulting in over 1100 fatalities) when President Pierre Nkurunziza announced he was running for a third term (at odds with the constitution's two-term limit). Government security forces and a pro-government militia (the Imbonerakure) began targeting suspected dissidents.² Several armed groups were formed and some, like RED-Tabara, began operating out of eastern DRC.³ In 2019 the civil unrest and armed violence left nearly 300 people dead, including over 100 battle-related fatalities and over 160 from violence against civilians.⁴ The Imbonerakure continued to be one of the most active perpetrators of violence targeting civilians, especially in the context of the approaching 2020 presidential elections.⁵

¹ African Development Bank, 'Central Africa'.

² Mayanja, N. E., 'Burundi's enduring legacy of ethnic violence and political conflict', Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, Feb. 2019.

³ Defense Post, 'Several killed in clashes between Burundi security forces and RED-Tabara rebels', 23 Oct. 2019; and Defense Post, 'Gunmen ambush Burundi soldiers near Rwanda border, defense ministry says', 19 Nov. 2019.

⁴ Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 'Data export tool', [n.d.].

⁵ Kishi, R. et al., *Year in Review* (ACLED, 2 Mar. 2020), p. 55.

Table 7.6. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in the Central African Republic, 2013–19

Event type	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Battles	1 223	1 144	191	443	1 250	624	280
Explosions/remote violence	4	105	12	1	10	2	3
Protests, riots and strategic developments	122	105	56	8	14	25	4
Violence against civilians	1 210	2 265	266	287	555	520	286
Total	2 559	3 619	525	739	1 829	1 171	573

Note: For definitions of event types, see Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), ‘ACLED definitions of political violence and protest’, 11 Apr. 2019.

Source: ACLED, ‘Data export tool’, [n.d.].

The Central African Republic

Almost the entire territory of the CAR has been affected by conflict and violence among shifting alliances of armed groups that have displaced 25 per cent of the population. The armed conflict began in December 2012 between the mainly Muslim Séléka armed group (which seized power in 2013) and the mainly Christian Anti-balaka armed group. Although the Séléka handed power to a transitional government in 2014, violence continued, and the country was effectively partitioned despite the presence of a United Nations peace operation, the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the CAR (MINUSCA). Since then both groups have splintered into smaller factions, and despite a June 2017 peace agreement between the government and 13 of the 14 armed groups, violence soon resumed.⁶ In July 2017 the African Union (AU) and partners produced a new road map for peace and reconciliation in the CAR, but the situation continued to deteriorate in 2018 with neither MINUSCA nor the fledgling national army, trained by the European Union (EU) and Russian advisers, able to constrain the fighting.⁷

However, in 2019 the number of attacks targeting civilians and clashes among armed groups decreased (largely as a result of a new peace agreement and ceasefire, see below), resulting in the lowest level of conflict-related fatalities since 2015, see table 7.6. Nonetheless, a UN panel of experts on the CAR concluded that displacement figures—at the end of September 2019 more than 600 000 people remained internally displaced, while the number of CAR refugees had risen to 607 000 (mostly in Cameroon, Chad and

⁶ Centraafrique-presse, ‘Accord politique pour la paix en République centrafricaine’ [Political agreement for peace in the Central African Republic], Blog post, 19 June 2017. On the historical and contemporary roots of conflict in CAR, see Olayiwola, O. A., ‘A leadership perspective for sustainable peace in the Central African Republic’, African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes, 2 Sep. 2019.

⁷ On developments in the CAR in 2017–18, see *SIPRI Yearbook 2018*, pp. 87–88; and *SIPRI Yearbook 2019*, pp. 129–31. On MINUSCA’s role in 2018, see *SIPRI Yearbook 2019*, pp. 166–67. On local and international stakeholders views on security sector reform in the CAR, see Glawion, T. et al., ‘Securing legitimate stability in CAR: External assumptions and local perspectives’, SIPRI Policy Study, Sep. 2019.

the DRC)—indicated little change in the security situation.⁸ There were also continued reports of violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, and about 2.6 million people (more than half of the population) remained in need of humanitarian assistance, with about 41 per cent of the population being severely food insecure.⁹

A new peace agreement in 2019

On 6 February 2019, following months of negotiations, the government and 14 armed groups reached a new peace agreement, the Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in the Central African Republic, following talks in Sudan facilitated by Russia—the eighth such agreement since the outbreak of conflict in 2013.¹⁰ Representatives from armed groups were granted ministerial positions in a new inclusive government as part of the peace deal. The agreement began to fray almost immediately, with the withdrawal of some of the signatories, but following further discussions under AU auspices in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, on 18–20 March 2019, the government agreed to increase the number of ministerial posts given to armed groups, and the deal appeared to be back on track.¹¹

The UN panel of experts on the CAR reported in December 2019 that the agreement's implementation 'remained limited'.¹² One of the main provisions of the agreement was to establish by April 2019 three joint government-armed group security units, known as special mixed security units (*unités spéciales mixtes de sécurité*, USMS), which were designed to encourage armed groups 'to protect the populations instead of committing racketeering crimes', according to AU spokesperson, Francis Che.¹³ However, training and operationalization of the joint security units were delayed, and only one (covering the west of the country) was close to being operational at the end of

⁸ UN Security Council, 'Final report of the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic extended pursuant to Security Council resolution 2454 (2019)', S/2019/930, 14 Dec. 2019, p. 8.

⁹ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Aperçu des Besoins Humanitaires: République Centrafricaine 2020 [Humanitarian Needs Overview: Central African Republic 2020]*, Oct. 2019, (in French); IPC, 'IPC acute food insecurity analysis 2019, Central African Republic', June 2019; UN Security Council, S/2019/930 (note 8), pp. 20–35; UN General Assembly, Human Rights Council, 'Human rights situation in the Central African Republic', A/HRC/42/61, 9 Aug. 2019; and OCHA, 'Central African Republic, Overview of population movements', 25 Oct. 2019.

¹⁰ The agreement is annexed to the UN Security Council, Letter dated 14 February 2019 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council, S/2019/145, 15 Feb. 2019.

¹¹ Hilton, K., 'CAR peace accord: Efforts continue to save deal', *Cameroon Tribune*, 21 Mar. 2019; and Institute for Security Studies, 'The AU has stepped in to save the February peace deal in the Central African Republic, but it remains fragile', 23 Apr. 2019.

¹² UN Security Council, S/2019/930 (note 8). Also see Diatta, M. M., 'Can the Central African Republic's peace deal be saved?', Institute for Security Studies, 7 Oct. 2019.

¹³ Cited in Surprenant, A., 'In Central African Republic, rebels fight on as peace deal falters', *New Humanitarian*, 4 Nov. 2019.

Table 7.7. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 2013–19

Event type	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Battles	1 093	603	749	899	1 364	1 744	1 970
Explosions/remote violence	77	10	13	4	108	9	15
Protests, riots and strategic developments	16	38	65	145	79	56	119
Violence against civilians	789	579	936	693	1 659	1 286	1 564
Total	1 975	1 230	1 763	1 741	3 210	3 095	3 668

Note: For definitions of event types, see Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), ‘ACLED definitions of political violence and protest’, 11 Apr. 2019.

Source: ACLED, ‘Data export tool’, [n.d.].

2019.¹⁴ Disagreements over the units’ command structures and the reluctance of some armed groups to commit fighters to longer-term disarmament has hindered formation of the USMS.¹⁵

After receiving training from the EU and Russian military advisers, the national army has now been deployed across most of the country, but continued to face operational challenges, despite the easing of the UN arms embargo in September 2019.¹⁶ Implementation of the national disarmament, demobilization, reintegration and repatriation programme gathered pace: since its launch on 17 December 2018, 1321 combatants, including 81 women, have been disarmed and demobilized, and 802 weapons of war, 1239 unexploded ordnances and 67 281 rounds of ammunition collected. Despite this progress, the UN secretary-general reported that the disarmament and demobilization timelines were not being met—the process was scheduled to end in January 2020—mainly due to some armed groups failing to commit to disarmament.¹⁷

The government, with the support of MINUSCA, has had some success with dialogue and reconciliation efforts at the local level, and established 29 local peace and reconciliation committees across the country during 2019.¹⁸ In November 2019 the mandate of MINUSCA was extended for a further 12 months until 15 November 2020.¹⁹ At the end of 2019 the peace agreement remained fragile. Presidential and legislative elections sched-

¹⁴ UN Security Council, ‘Central African Republic’, Report of the Secretary-General, S/2020/124, 14 Feb. 2020; and UN Security Council, S/2019/930 (note 8), pp. 10–12.

¹⁵ International Crisis Group, *Making the Central African Republic’s Latest Peace Agreement Stick*, Africa Report no. 277 (International Crisis Group: 18 June 2019); and UN Security Council, S/2019/930 (note 8), pp. 10–12.

¹⁶ UN Security Council, S/2019/930 (note 8), pp. 32–35. On changes to the UN arms embargo on the CAR, see chapter 14, section II, in this volume.

¹⁷ UN Security Council, Letter dated 31 December 2019 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council, S/2019/1008, 31 Dec. 2019.

¹⁸ UN Security Council, ‘Central African Republic’, Report of the Secretary-General, S/2019/822, 15 Oct. 2019.

¹⁹ UN Security Council Resolution 2499, 15 Nov. 2019.

uled for December 2020 could lead to further instability, especially as the commitment of some of the signatory armed groups to implement the peace agreement remained in question.²⁰

The Democratic Republic of the Congo

The DRC—the second-largest country in Africa with a population of about 80 million—is suffering from one of the longest and most complex crises in the world, where armed conflict, epidemics and natural disasters combine with high levels of poverty, weak public infrastructure and services. Competition over land and mineral resources are also part of the conflict dynamic.²¹ Since the end of the 1998–2003 Second Congo War conflict has persisted in the eastern DRC, where there are still dozens of armed groups and a major UN peacekeeping force, the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO), has been deployed since 1999.²²

The election held on 31 December 2018 resulted in the first peaceful transfer of power to an opposition party in the country's history. Although the results of the election were disputed and challenged by some observers and candidates, Félix Tshisekedi was declared the new president in early January.²³ He promised reforms and immediately released over 700 political prisoners.²⁴ He also prioritized improving relations with the country's neighbours—Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda—with the goal of establishing a new framework for regional cooperation against armed groups within the DRC.²⁵ While most of the DRC's 26 provinces were stable in 2019, 6 of the eastern provinces (particularly Ituri, North Kivu and South Kivu) faced continued attacks by armed groups and a resurgence of intercommunal violence.

The overall scale of violence remained high, as reflected in the conflict-related fatalities for 2019 being the highest recorded in the 2013–19 period (see table 7.7). Ongoing insurgencies in the eastern provinces by nearly 20 armed groups contributed to the rise in overall fatalities.²⁶ The Armed

²⁰ Surprenant (note 13).

²¹ For detailed analysis of the armed conflict, see the various reports of the group of experts on the DRC, e.g. UN Security Council, 'Midterm report of the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo', S/2019/974, 20 Dec. 2019.

²² The UN Organization Mission in the DRC was deployed in 1999 and renamed MONUSCO in 2010.

²³ Salihu, N., 'Elections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo', African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes, 2 Sep. 2019; and Wilson, T. et al., 'Congo voting data reveal huge fraud in poll to replace Kabila', *Financial Times*, 15 Jan. 2019.

²⁴ UN Security Council, 'United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo', Report of the Secretary-General, S/2019/575, 17 July 2019; and Al Jazeera, 'DRC President Tshisekedi pardons about 700 political prisoners', 14 Mar. 2019.

²⁵ International Crisis Group, 'A new approach to the UN to stabilise the DR Congo', Africa Briefing no. 148, 4 Dec. 2019.

²⁶ For details of the armed groups, see Africa Intelligence, 'Felix Tshisekedi a hostage to armed groups', *West Africa Newsletter*, issue 798, 10 Apr. 2019; and UN Security Council, S/2019/974 (note 21).

Conflict Location & Event Data Project recorded over 900 events with direct targeting of civilians, including a significant rise in political violence by anonymous or unidentified armed groups.²⁷ A former militia leader in the DRC, Bosco Ntaganda, was convicted in July 2019 by the International Criminal Court (ICC) of war crimes committed in 2002–2003, and was sentenced to 30 years in prison, the longest the ICC has ever handed down.²⁸ Four other militia leaders are being tried by the ICC, while others are being tried in national courts.²⁹

With more than 940 000 people displaced in 2019, the DRC hosted the largest internally displaced population in Africa (5.01 million displaced people), as well as some 517 000 refugees from neighbouring countries. Almost 16 million people faced severe acute food insecurity—the second-highest number of acutely food-insecure people worldwide.³⁰ Enduring health epidemics further added to the severity of the crisis. The Ebola virus disease outbreak that began in August 2018 is the second-largest recorded outbreak in global history, and as of 31 December 2019, 2232 people had died from it.³¹ Efforts to combat the Ebola outbreak were hampered by attacks on health workers and treatment centres.³² The DRC also experienced its worst measles epidemic, with more than 6000 deaths during 2018–19, and outbreaks of cholera also remained a major concern.³³ The number of people in need of humanitarian assistance in the DRC is expected to rise to 15.9 million in 2020 (20 per cent of the population), with at least 4 million people expected to be at emergency levels of food insecurity.³⁴

The future of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

The focus of MONUSCO's mandate has generally been the protection of civilians and the extension of state authority in eastern DRC. Since 2013 this has included a Force Intervention Brigade authorized by the UN Security Council to 'neutralize and disarm' armed groups, including via offensive operations. However, the scope of these interventions has been

²⁷ Kishi et al. (note 5), pp. 28, 34, 36; and *The Economist*, 'Killings in Congo's north-east spark fears of a return to war', 13 July 2019.

²⁸ BBC, 'Bosco Ntaganda sentenced to 30 years for crimes in DR Congo', 7 Nov. 2019.

²⁹ *The Economist*, 'A warlord's trial aims to end impunity in Congo', 18 Dec. 2019.

³⁰ OCHA, *Global Humanitarian Overview 2020* (OCHA: Geneva, Dec. 2019), p. 55.

³¹ World Health Organization, 'Ebola virus disease—Democratic Republic of the Congo', Disease outbreak news: Update, 2 Jan. 2020.

³² Goldstein, J., 'Fighting Ebola when mourners fight the responders', *New York Times*, 19 May 2019; and Burke, J., 'Ebola health workers killed and injured by rebel attack in Congo', *The Guardian*, 28 Nov. 2019.

³³ World Health Organization, 'Deaths from Democratic Republic of Congo measles outbreak top 6000', 7 Jan. 2020; and World Health Organization, 'Major cholera vaccination campaign begins in North Kivu in the Democratic Republic of the Congo', 27 May 2019.

³⁴ OCHA (note 30).

limited by, among other things, a lack of capacity and political will among troop contributors.³⁵ Since 2018 MONUSCO has also been providing logistical support to the Ebola response. In March 2019 the UN Security Council extended MONUSCO's mandate for nine months, and called for an independent strategic review of the mission, including consideration of an exit strategy.³⁶ The review, published in October 2019, concluded that a successful, gradual transition and a responsible exit of MONUSCO would take an 'absolute minimum' of three years, but would have to remain flexible based on the ongoing security situation in the DRC. The review envisaged a progressive transfer of MONUSCO's tasks to the Government of the DRC.³⁷ In December 2019 MONUSCO's mandate and troop ceiling was extended until 20 December 2020.³⁸

MONUSCO's footprint has reduced in recent years, not least because former president Joseph Kabila was hostile to it. The new president is more supportive and has enabled its continuation largely unchanged.³⁹ It remains too early to assess whether the recent democratic transition can provide an enabling environment for sustainable peace, including bringing to an end the armed conflict in eastern DRC, that would also permit the anticipated drawdown of MONUSCO.

³⁵ International Crisis Group (note 25); and Sweet, R., 'Militarizing the peace: UN intervention against Congo's "terrorist" rebels', *Lawfare*, 2 June 2019.

³⁶ UN Security Council Resolution 2463, 29 Mar. 2019.

³⁷ UN Security Council, 'Transitioning from stabilization to peace: An independent strategic review of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo', S/2019/842, 25 Oct. 2019.

³⁸ UN Security Council Resolution 2502, 19 Dec. 2019.

³⁹ *Afrique Panorama*, 'Félix Tshisekedi at the UN: "The DRC still needs MONUSCO"', 27 Sep. 2019.