

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC
ANATOMY OF A PHANTOM STATE

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CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC: ANATOMY OF A PHANTOM STATE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Central African Republic (CAR) is if anything worse than a failed state: it has become virtually a phantom state, lacking any meaningful institutional capacity at least since the fall of Emperor Bokassa in 1979. The recently approved European Union (EU) and UN forces (EUFOR and MINURCAT), which are to complement the African Union (AU/UN) effort in Darfur, can make an important contribution to helping the CAR begin the long, slow process of getting to its feet. But to do so they must find a way to make use of the strengths of the former colonial power, France, without merely serving as international cover for Paris's continued domination.

The CAR has been formally independent for nearly a half century but its government only gained a first measure of popular legitimacy through free elections in 1993. The democratisation process soon ran aground due to newly manipulated communal divisions between the people living along the river and those of the savannah, which plunged the country into civil war. Through a succession of mutinies and rebellions which have produced a permanent crisis, the government has lost its monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Foreign troops mostly contain the violence in the capital, Bangui, but the north is desperate and destitute, and in a state of permanent insecurity.

By privatising the state for their own benefit, the CAR's leaders are able to prosper, while using repression to ensure impunity. François Bozizé was brought to power in 2003 by France and Chad and democratically elected two years later but, like his predecessor Ange-Félix Patassé, he has provoked a state of permanent rebellion with disastrous humanitarian consequences. Since the summer of 2005, the army and particularly the Presidential Guard – essentially a tribal militia – have committed widespread acts of brutality in Patassé's north west stronghold. Hundreds of civilians have been summarily executed and thousands of homes have been burned. At least 100,000 people have fled to forest hideouts, where they are exposed to the elements.

The EU peacekeeping force, mandated by the UN Security Council to assist in securing refugee camps at the border with Darfur, is to be deployed in early 2008 to north eastern CAR and eastern Chad. The initiative for this operation comes from France, which has persuaded its

partners to prevent the conflict ravaging western Sudan from spilling over international borders by complementing the hybrid AU/UN mission to Darfur itself.

Like Darfur, the Vakaga province of the CAR is geographically remote, historically marginalised and, above all, neglected by a central administration whose only response to political unrest has been the imposition of military control. In their efforts to contain any spillover of political unrest from Darfur, the international community runs the risk of allowing President Bozizé's regime to shirk its responsibilities and maintain the current cycle of instability in the CAR.

The EU deployment will carry a heavy post-colonial burden. Like in Chad, France, as the former colonial power, is at the same time the worst and best placed to intervene in CAR: the worst placed because of its almost continual interference post-independence and the best placed because it has both the will and the means to act. Since Paris will continue to supply most of EUFOR's muscle, the new arrangement is largely perceived as a change of badge and helmet to give the French military's role greater international legitimacy. Nevertheless, EUFOR could make an important contribution if it carries forward a badly needed reform of the CAR military and if it is coordinated with an EU comprehensive strategy to take the country out of its current political, economic and security quagmire.

If the CAR's many structural problems are to be solved, however, all actors will need to be committed: the government in Bangui, the rebel movements, African regional bodies and the Security Council, as well as the EU and France. It might be the last chance for the CAR to break out of its phantom status before any pretence of its independence and sovereignty disappears in the vicious circle of state failure, violence and growing poverty in which it has been trapped.

This broad background report is Crisis Group's first on the CAR and lays the foundation for subsequent, more narrowly focused analysis of specific issues.

Nairobi/Brussels, 13 December 2007

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC: ANATOMY OF A PHANTOM STATE

I. INTRODUCTION

The only misfortune the Central African Republic (CAR) still lacked was a major crisis on its borders. However, during spring 2006, the conflict in Darfur made itself felt in the CAR, Central Africa's weak link, the only country in the region that does not produce oil, a phantom state that haunts a territory of 623,000 sq. km (slightly larger than France, slightly smaller than Texas), with large areas covered by tropical forests and a population of only 4.2 million. That is only an estimate as statistics in the CAR have become unreliable in the absence of a civil census, an administration worthy of the name and even roads, schools and health centres, especially in the interior.

After years of colonial, neo-colonial and regional domination, the CAR, a state never really constructed, collapsed with the militarisation of its politics and the ethnic exclusiveness of successive governments. The current head of state, François Bozizé, is only the most recent incarnation, and closely resembles his predecessors. Even though he was democratically elected in 2005, there could be only one result of his brutal and profiteering government: permanent rebellion.

Since the middle of the 1990s, no two consecutive academic years have gone by without a major teachers strike disrupting education, or a military rebellion or coup causing annual exams to be cancelled. There are 212,000 displaced Central Africans, at least half of whom are living in the forest, well away from the main roads, in order to escape the violence and insecurity – a generic term that includes the banditry of the so-called “road-cutters”, clashes between the rebels and the army and the atrocities of all these groups against the civilian population. There are 80,000 Central African refugees in neighbouring countries, including Chad (50,000) and Cameroon (27,000).¹

The unquestionably fair elections of May 2005 and existing public freedoms, which allow political objectives to be pursued legally, means there is no justification for

recourse to arms in the CAR. Although it is far from perfect, there is real freedom of expression. However, the government has not ensured the independence of the judiciary, respect for human rights, the democratic exercise of power or financial transparency and has therefore failed to make the country forget it came to power by force of arms. Soldiers conduct indiscriminate reprisals and inflict atrocities against the civilian population – especially in the north west where belonging to a particular ethnic group is taken as an indication of rebel status – to such an extent that it is difficult to know whether it is rebel activity or the army's scorched earth strategy that contributes most to the collapse of public order. In the north east, this scorched earth policy, in which Chad is also heavily implicated, is further complicated by the fallout from the conflict in neighbouring Darfur – and the hand of Khartoum.

How can such a vast country, so scarcely populated and blessed by nature, have been reduced to this? The reply requires a look at both the balance sheet of the regime and the country's often dramatic history, which reads like a genealogy of crime, starting with the slave raids of old to today's rebel atrocities and including the actions of “ex-liberators” and government soldiers, a colonial regime that was costly in human life and the murderous escapades of Bokassa the 1st. Initially the “Cinderella of the French empire”, then an empire subject to the will of its most despotic leader and, finally, a “garrison country” for French forces in Africa, the CAR has collapsed for reasons it is essential to understand at a time when the conflict in Darfur poses a new challenge to another “failed state” and, through it, to the international community.

¹ “CAR Fact Sheet”, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), September 2007.

II. FROM THE FRENCH EMPIRE TO THE CENTRAL AFRICAN EMPIRE

Much more than other former French colonies in Africa, the former Oubangui-Chari, later renamed the Central African Republic, is an accident of colonial history. In 1896, a French military column left Gabon with the aim of linking the Third Republic's territorial conquests in west and east Africa. Under the command of Captain Jean-Baptiste Marchand, it was composed of twelve Europeans, 150 African infantry and 13,500 porters. It also had a steamboat, the *Faidherbe*, which it was necessary to completely dismantle in order to clear the rapids once they arrived at Bangui, founded nine years earlier by the brothers Albert and Michel Dolisie. The Congo-Nile mission aimed to reach Sudan.

It arrived there after a thousand adventures. But there was someone waiting for it on the Upper Nile, near to a small town called Fashoda. Having travelled back up the Nile with a sizeable detachment, the future Lord Kitchener, who had just crushed the Mahdists in the battle of Omdurman, notified the French that they did not have the resources to challenge the Anglo-Egyptian condominium established in the Sudan. It was a banal observation of the balance of power. "The dream of a French Africa stretching from the Gulf of Guinea to the Indian Ocean became remote and rather than becoming the platform for this penetration the Oubangui-Chari region became a cul-de-sac".²

A. A COLONIAL CUL-DE-SAC

Between March and July 1899, the minister of colonies in Paris granted "vacant and unowned land" in the French Congo, the name of French Equatorial Africa (FEA) until 1910, to about 40 private companies for a period of 30 years. A reincarnation of the previous century's "chartered companies", these companies shared 70 per cent of FEA territory.³ However, unlike the already established companies in the Belgian Congo, they had very little capital and their investments represented no more than 1 per cent of the capital invested in the French empire, and 0.1 per cent of French foreign investment.

1. Exploitation and weak administration

While the Belgian Congo companies were making fabulous profits, the French companies lived from hand to mouth and coaxed support from the French state. They did not even have the resources to form their own armed forces and sometimes borrowed regional guards from France to maintain order in their area. Most of the time they recruited private security guards, who were often former members of the French army. These agents of authority, wearing infantry uniforms, were equipped with the 1886 model of the Lebel gun, which became their badge of office, even though they rarely had a cartridge to fire. The brigadier received eight and only then when his troops had to provide an escort for the movement of cash.⁴

This parastatal amalgamation, so characteristic of French mercantilism, was made official on 19 March 1903, in a circular from Commissioner General Emile Gentil informing the colonial administrators they would henceforth be graded on the basis of how much head tax they collected, payable in rubber by the "indigenous people". From then, the fate of the state and the companies owning concessions was inextricably linked, with officials acting like commercial agents when collecting latex as tax in kind and companies buying the latex at low prices. This was very different to the colonisation of West Africa, where a much tighter administrative network and long-established commercial trading posts avoided the concession of state monopolies and attributes to the private sector. An illustration of the difference between FEA and French West Africa (FWA) was that, in 1930, FWA had about 500 teachers, 90 per cent of whom were Africans, while there were only 80 teachers, including about 60 Africans, in the FEA.⁵

In Oubangui-Chari, which became a colony in 1903, seventeen companies made the law for over half the territory. At the peak of the rubber boom, they made a number of indigenous people into virtual slaves collecting rubbervine. The most important of these companies, the *Compagnie des sultanats du Haut-Oubangui*, administered 145,000 sq. km, from Kotto in the west to the border with Sudan. Moreover, the *Compagnie du Kouango français*, *Compagnie commerciale et coloniale de la Mambéré-Sangha*, *Compagnie française de l'Ouhamé et de la Nana*, *Compagnie des caoutchoucs et des produits de la Lobaye* and the *Concession de la Mpoko* embodied rule by "the whites", all the more so because the colonial administration was so weak.⁶

² Jean-Noël Brégeon, *Un rêve d'Afrique : Administrateurs en Oubangui-Chari, la Cendrillon de l'empire* (Paris, 1998), p. 24.

³ Cf., for the sequel, see Pierre Kalck, *Histoire centrafricaine des origines à 1966* (Paris, 1992); and Olivier Colombani, *Mémoires coloniales : La fin de l'Empire français d'Afrique vue par les administrateurs coloniaux* (Paris, 1991).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

Bangui, where it rains from February-March until November-December, was not very appealing, while the interior of this unattractive colony, lacking in advantages and resources and dubbed the “Cinderella of the Empire”, was even less enticing. The European presence was always modest: 80 expatriates in 1900; 163 (including 130 French) in 1915; 1,932 in 1921; and 4,696 in 1931, the year after the colonial exhibition in the Park of Vincennes, near Paris. On that occasion, Oubangui-Chari sent some fruits, hunting trophies and stuffed animals to furnish the oval-shaped hut from the FEA and about 30 natives to people the “Negro village” that was supposed to represent the continent’s diversity.⁷

2. Colonial crimes and depopulation

In the country itself, the reality was very different and, from time to time, muffled echoes of that reality reached the metropolis. For example, in January 1905, eighteen months after the event, it was learned that two colonial officials had blown up a black African with dynamite at Fort-Crampel, now Bambari, to celebrate 14 July. Like a rocket, a certain Pakpa, a “guide” in his country, had a stick of dynamite tied around his neck by Fernand-Léopold Gaud, a senior clerk working on indigenous affairs who wanted to mark the national day of celebration in 1903 in a way that would be unforgettable for the natives. “It is a bit stupid but it will dumbfound the natives”, he explained. “After this, they will probably keep quiet”.⁸

His accomplice, Georges-Emile Toqué, who was a level three assistant administrator in Haut-Chari, described the context in which the crime took place in the following way: “It was very difficult to ensure the services run smoothly”. When the Brazzaville courts sentenced the two accused to five years in prison, the public gallery choked with indignation. “We are better off being black”, shouted someone in the court room when the verdict was announced. For the colonialists in the CAR, the murder of a black was like killing an animal and should not have been punished at all.⁹

For a long time, apart from being a staging point, Oubangui-Chari was no more than a source of gum arabic and free labour. The colonial archives are full of documents attesting to the difficulty of recruiting 3,000 porters every month to transport loads from the Congo-Brazzaville river-front or Cameroon to Chad, where French troops depended on the provision of supplies. As the work was unpaid, it was impossible to find any

porters ready to leave their villages and families to walk, loaded like mules, to the slave-owning areas of the Sahel. The population always fled at these times, going deeper and deeper into the equatorial forest. The truth is that there were never genuine volunteers and the French resorted to an increasingly coercive policy.

On 16 October 1901, a circular signed by a certain Captain Thomasset ordered the construction of hostage camps, which were to be hidden in the forest so that ordinary travellers would not see them. A whole range of sanctions was inflicted on chiefs incapable of supplying the required number of porters: they were arrested or flogged with a whip made from hippopotamus hide; the women and children of their village were taken prisoner and kept hostage until the porters returned. Finally, if this blackmail failed, punitive expeditions were organised against recalcitrant villages, which were burned down and their inhabitants killed as an example. In addition to portering, Africans were forced to work on the Congo-Ocean Railway between 1921 and 1934. Thousands died, between 15,000 and 30,000, according to various estimates.¹⁰

In all, between 1890 and 1940, half the population of the CAR perished from a combination of microbial shock and colonial violence.¹¹ One example of this violence was the killing by the French of Jean-Bedel Bokassa’s father, on 13 September 1927, in front of the Lobaye prefecture in south west Oubangui-Chari, for releasing villagers who had been thrown in prison for reasons unknown. Once in power, Bokassa used to often claim the French had “stuck a nail in his father’s head because, at that time, bullets were too precious to waste on a native”.¹² In fact, the precise circumstances of his father’s death are unknown. We only know that Mindogon Ngboundoulou – whose first name means war expert, in Mbaka – was a local chief and seen by the local colonialists as a potential rebel.

Be that as it may, the injustice suffered in 1927 was so outrageous that one week later, on 20 September, Bokassa’s mother committed suicide, an extremely rare event in the local culture. At the age of six, the future emperor therefore became an orphan as a result of a colonial crime. Taken in by his paternal grandfather, along with his eleven brothers and sisters, he was enrolled at the Sainte-Jeanne-d’Arc School in Mbaiki, Lobaye’s administrative centre, 40km from the village

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Cf. Géraldine Faes and Stephen Smith, *Bokassa 1er : Un empereur français* (Paris, 2000), p. 59.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Cf. Géraldine Faes and Stephen Smith, “République Centrafricaine : La solitude et le chaos”, *Politique Internationale*, no. 88 (summer 2000), p. 284.

¹¹ Cf. Pierre Saulnier, *Le Centrafrique : Entre mythe et réalité* (Paris, 1998), pp. 81-96.

¹² Cf. Faes and Smith, *Bokassa 1er*, op. cit., p. 62.

where he was born. The fact that Catholic missionaries opened the doors of one of the best educational establishments in the interior of the country to him can be interpreted as a desire to indicate their disagreement with the murder of his father. However, it is also true that Bokassa's parents were among the very few to have been converted to the Christian faith. At that time, there were only 3,500 "baptised natives" in the whole of Oubangui-Chari.¹³

One year later, in 1928, the murder of another local chief, Barka Ngainombey, provoked an uprising among the Gbaya, neighbours of the Mbaka, in north west Oubangui-Chari. The revolt of the Kongo-Wara, which was to go down in the history books as the "War of the Hoe Handle", because of the implement brandished by rebel leaders, was not definitively stamped out until 1930. Having taken on the character of an anti-colonial insurrection, it mobilised about 50,000 supporters against 1,000 infantry and regional guards, plus 3,000 auxiliaries, scouts and porters. In its final phase, when 10,000 implacable opponents were pursued into the caves to which they had retreated, the war resulted in thousands of deaths.¹⁴

Another child miraculously rescued from a minimal education and, moreover, a cousin of Bokassa, Barthélemy Boganda was the first Catholic priest in l'Oubangui-Chari. Leader of the Movement for the Social Evolution of Black Africa (MESAN), he became the territory's deputy at the French National Assembly in Paris in 1946. He naturally personified the awakening Central African nation in the 1950s. However, on the eve of independence, on 29 March 1959, the country's only leader to have any political experience died in an accident generally attributed (without irrefutable evidence) to an act of sabotage by French colonialists. It was one more handicap for a country that had already accumulated a long list of problems.

B. FROM INDEPENDENCE TO BOKASSA 1ST

Boganda's spiritual heir Abel Goumba, a young teacher of medicine with socialist ideas and member of a small ethnic minority, the Banziri, succeeded the deceased father of the nation as Oubangui-Chari's prime minister. As such, he was favourite to become president when the territory became independent on 13 August 1960, two years after being granted internal autonomy. However, the then minister of the interior, an Mbaka teacher called David Dacko¹⁵ who was supported by French colonialists,

surrounded parliament with a band of pygmies armed with poison arrows and forced the deputies to elect him as president. The parliament was all the more ready to do so as, at the same time, he "confirmed" an extension to the deputies' term in office, without any obligation for them to seek a mandate from the electorate. So it was therefore he who became the first president of a sovereign Central African Republic.

1. Construction of a predator state

His first action as president was to place Abel Goumba under house arrest and ban his rival's party. An authoritarian regime was very quickly created by voting through a whole series of laws against freedom that allowed the government to repress acts of resistance or disobedience to the authorities; dissolve political parties, trade unions and other associations incompatible with public order; intern individuals judged to be dangerous and censor subversive writings, etc. This plunged the country back into the darkest hours of the colonial era. The former colonial power did not oppose this retrograde step. On the contrary, Paris appeared to be complicit. When Dacko finally decided to prosecute Abel Goumba in 1962, the latter's lawyer, Me Marcel Manville, was taken off his plane to Bangui at the stopover in Nice, at the request of Jacques Foccart.¹⁶

However, in order to curb the runaway corruption that was picking up speed despite the maintenance of many technical advisers in positions of authority, Paris imposed a program of economic recovery in 1961. In order to avoid cluttering up the prisons, it was pragmatically decided that only those responsible for misappropriations above 250,000 FCFA (€764), twenty times the then average annual wage, would be given prison sentences. Nevertheless, between 1963 and 1965 about twenty prefects and deputy prefects found themselves behind bars. As elsewhere in Africa, civil servants with exorbitant privileges at every level of the state apparatus formed a parasitic caste living from development aid funds and on the back of the peasants.

"The only result of Central Africa's agricultural policy has been to create, on contact with a desperately poor population, a new class of privileged officials paid from public funds", concluded the agronomist René Dumont,

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 65.

¹⁵ Born 24 March 1930 in Bouchia, 120km downstream from Bangui, David Dacko, the son of a peasant, first became a teacher, then school director. In 1957, he was elected a

deputy for MESAN, the party created by his cousin Barthélémy Boganda.

¹⁶ Cf. Faes and Smith, "La solitude et le chaos", op. cit., p. 288. The irremovable secretary general of the Élysée responsible for African affairs and the Secret Service and as such, leader of the Gaullist networks in Africa.

author of *L'Afrique noire est mal partie*,¹⁷ in 1965 after undertaking an evaluation mission. Taxes crushed the peasants, especially those planting cotton, the main cash crop. However, France, which had 6,000 French nationals living very comfortably in Bangui, closed its eyes to all this and supported the government by making additional grants.

At the end of 1963, President Dacko asked the chamber of deputies to extend his term of office from five to seven years and to introduce universal suffrage for presidential elections. In January 1964, as candidate for the single party established two years previously, he was elected as president, without false modesty, by every elector. On 29 September, in search of new support, he recognised the People's Republic of China and expressed his wish for special cooperation between Bangui and Beijing. Eyebrows were raised in Paris. On 15 January 1965, the head of the CAR introduced a "compulsory national loan", which doubled per capita tax. Only 182 million of the 500 million FCFA this fiscal hold-up was scheduled to collect reached the state coffers.¹⁸

At the end of 1965, aware that he did not have the capacity to govern the country, Dacko, a weak-willed man tempted by authoritarian excess, slipped into a deep depression, creating a power vacuum. The president thought of handing power to his friend, the head of the gendarmerie, Colonel Jean Izamo. But Izamo was beaten to it by Colonel Jean-Bedel Bokassa, a former captain of the French army who had become Chief of Staff less than five years after independence.

2. Bokassa in power (1965-1979), emergence of the criminal state

In the night of 31 December 1965, Colonel Bokassa and a group of young officers took power without a problem. Bokassa justified his action by saying, "I have taken power because Dacko no longer wanted it and I saved his life by pre-empting Izamo and Mounoumbaï who wanted to besiege the palace and kill our president".¹⁹ The New Year's Eve coup was unnecessarily bloody. Bokassa killed his main rival, Colonel Izamo, with his own hands, stabbing him repeatedly with his sword before leaving him to die a long and agonising death. Although the deposed president was spared, probably because he was a Mbaka like Bokassa, several members of his entourage were killed during the coup. On the following day, the victors proclaimed the advent of a cleansed republic.

Most Central Africans welcomed the junta with relief if not enthusiasm, as it announced its mission would be to eradicate corruption and get the country back to work. Until 1970, the new regime was able to retain its initial popularity. Operation Bokassa, launched to get the economy back on its feet and improve the situation of the peasants, who made up 90 per cent of the population, was a voluntaristic success despite the absence of method. Leaving the construction of triumphal arches celebrating his imperial glory until later, the head of state launched an urban construction program that included the first modern buildings of "Bangui-la-Coquette", a reference that became popular at that time.²⁰

De Gaulle, who wanted nothing to do with the one who had deposed Dacko, finally accepted Bokassa. In 1966, the French president called him "a bloody idiot" with whom "one would never be able to do anything" and refused to receive him.²¹ Three years later, he called him a "good bloke". Jacques Foccart was always favourable to Bokassa and rendered him exceptional honours during his first visit to Paris. Following the example of De Gaulle, Georges Pompidou vacillated between utter exasperation and a certain sympathy for the CAR head of state. More than his predecessor, he left Foccart to deal with French policy in the former Oubangui-Chari. Constantly invoking Bokassa's francophilia (Bokassa had French nationality and publicly proclaimed it), Foccart decided on a policy of not upsetting the CAR president and ignoring his mood swings and eccentricities. Bokassa became president for life in 1972, marshal two years later and at one point, simultaneously head of ten ministries.²²

The indulgence displayed by Paris was further accentuated after 1974 with the election of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing because of the new French president's passion for hunting. He had for a long time been a keen hunter in Central Africa and before long, he was Bokassa's dear friend in the aristocratic style of France's *ancien régime*. Forgetting the fine resolutions of New Year's Eve 1965, the CAR marshal gave himself over to plundering his country with complete impunity. In 1976, he converted to Islam, becoming Salah Eddine Bokassa, to please Colonel Qaddafi and obtain a few grants from him. Meanwhile, the head of state's acute paranoia led to increased repression as the years went by, with more and more deaths and

¹⁷ Appearing in 1962, this work was soon translated into English (*False start in Africa*) and had a major impact.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 289.

¹⁹ Jean Français, *Le putsch de Bokassa : Histoire secrète* (Paris, 2004), p. 85.

²⁰ "Bangui la Coquette" is the name of a poem, published in 1961, by Marie Jeanne Caron, the first head teacher of the secondary school for young girls in Bangui, which took her name after her death. It finishes in this way: "Coquette like a courtier / You attract visitors / and you promise them happiness / binding their heart with your lianas / When the jet of water from your fountains / rises into the warm air of the night / It sings of your joy and sorrow /and murmurs your name: BANGUI".

²¹ Cf. Faes and Smith, *Bokassa Ier*, op. cit., p. 111.

²² Ibid.

victims of arbitrary rule. However, France never called into question its “enduring friendship with the Central African Republic and its president for life”, to use the time-honoured formula of the many official banquets. Every one of the many crises between Paris and Bangui during the 1970s was resolved with a present of reconciliation from the former metropolis, an aircraft or budgetary aid.²³

On 4 December 1976, thanks to a congress of the country’s single party, Bokassa announced the creation of the Central African Empire. He also announced his coronation would take place in exactly one year, on the date of his hero Napoleon’s coronation. With immediate effect and without the least dialogue, he changed the country’s constitution. There was then a headlong rush to organise the imperial celebrations. Prime Minister Ange-Félix Patassé was asked to give this initiative top priority and he carried out this task zealously. The equivalent of the CAR’s annual budget was spent on the great day, 4 December 1977. Five thousand distinguished guests were invited. France was represented by its minister of cooperation, Robert Galley. It was not known at the time that this “tropical farce”, which the international press ridiculed, was co-funded and co-organised by France, the Élysée, the ministries of cooperation and defence and also by the President François Giscard d’Estaing’s first cousin, the director general of the French Foreign Trade Bank (Banque Française de Commerce Extérieur, BFCE).²⁴

The BFCE, while awaiting repayment by Bangui, extended credit to the major organiser of the coronation, Jean-Pierre Dupont, a café room courtier of the time who was “mad on Africa” and had plenty of contacts with the French Secret Service. Jean-Pierre Dupont alone laid out 100 million francs (€15 million) for the imperial party.²⁵ This did not include the cost of the 32 half-breed, white-robed horses flown out from Normandy to Central Africa at a cost of 4 million francs (more than €600,000) at the expense of the French ministry of cooperation.²⁶ As for the ministry of defence, it loaned 625 ceremonial swords belonging to the Saint-Cyprien elite for a grandiose procession through Bangui. Following the events on his television screen at the Élysée, President Giscard d’Estaing believed he recognised “Africa’s ritual instincts”.²⁷

Resistance to the despot in power in Bangui, and to France, the power that sustained him, began to be organised in January 1979, with the founding of the Movement for the Liberation of the Central African People (MPLC). The former prime minister, Ange-Félix Patassé, became its

leader. Also in January 1979, school students demonstrating in the CAR capital were bloodily repressed. Then in April around 250 young people were picked up from the streets of Bangui and beaten up before being piled into cells at Ngaragba prison that were too small to contain them all. Dozens of them died, mostly from suffocation. In June 1987, when the criminal court of Bangui was called on to judge the ex-emperor after his return to the country, it concluded that torture had resulted in the deaths although there was no intention to kill. However, in 1979, when Valéry Giscard d’Estaing gave his “dear friend” the thumbs down as he had become too compromising, a commission of enquiry by African jurists concluded that the emperor had almost certainly personally put the imprisoned children to death.²⁸ After the Ngaragba massacre, Bokassa 1st ceased to be respectable – as if he had been previously.

The quarantine imposed by Paris became tighter when, after France had broken off all cooperation with him, Bokassa sought out a saviour and became close to Colonel Qaddafi. The French President then gave orders to “off-load” him.²⁹ In hindsight, the same people who had kept quiet about the very real atrocities committed by this tropical dictatorship – aggravated by the psychological troubles of the president for life, marshal and finally emperor – exaggerated his depravity to the extent that they denounced him, mistakenly, as a cannibal, after the discovery, completely fabricated, of human flesh in the imperial court’s cold stores in Bérengo. The former master of the CAR, forced into exile in Côte d’Ivoire, took revenge by revealing he had given trays of precious stones to Valéry Giscard d’Estaing. The “diamonds affair” was to play a major role in the French president’s failure to be re-elected in 1981.³⁰

On the night of 20 September 1979, Bokassa 1st was overthrown by French military intervention – Operation Barracuda – while visiting Libya. David Dacko reluctantly returned to government in the hold of a Transall aircraft belonging to the power that supported him and packed with French paratroopers, under the pretext that he remained legitimate head of a state whose government had been forcibly overthrown in 1965. This marked the beginning of the “Barracuda syndrome”, a term coined by Jean-Paul Ngoupandé³¹ to describe the infantilisation of a people that were so dispossessed of their own history that they were not even responsible for deposing their own tyrant. Reinstalled in the presidential seat by a seemingly perpetual tutelary power, first colonial then

²³ Ibid, pp. 16-50.

²⁴ Cf. for the sequel, Faes and Smith, *Bokassa 1er*, op. cit., pp. 15-50.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 22.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 37.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 48.

²⁸ A detailed report was published in 1987 by Seuil in Paris: André Baccard, *Les Martyrs de Bokassa* (Paris 1987).

²⁹ Cf. Faes and Smith, “La solitude et le chaos”, op. cit., p. 290.

³⁰ Cf. Faes and Smith, *Bokassa 1^{er}*, op. cit., pp. 49-50.

³¹ Jean-Paul Ngoupandé, *Chronique de la crise centrafricaine 1976-1997 : Le syndrome Barracuda* (Paris, 1997).

neo-colonial, David Dacko himself doubted his capacity to take control of the country again.³²

Not without reason, because his compatriots, even though they welcomed the end of the empire with relief, did not have good memories of his first spell as head of state. Demonstrations of discontent very quickly followed in the streets of Bangui. The French army was forced to stay to guarantee the security of the old regime it had restored to power. It improvised a base in the hangars behind the old airfield, now the Avenue des Martyrs. In the course of time and following further construction work, this bivouac was to become Camp Béal, named after the second in command of the French Operational Assistance Force (EFAO), the official name of the occupation forces – ex-liberators before they were invented – that the Central Africans would always call the “Barracudas”.

III. THE “BARRACUDA SYNDROME”

After the imperial dictatorship, which had finally exhausted France’s post-colonial patience, France took control of the CAR. Independent in principle but in reality dependent on France for everything, David Dacko’s ex/new regime always needed more foreign aid to survive. Soon, neither financial assistance from Paris nor the security provided by the French army in Bangui would be enough. It was necessary to increase funding and send French soldiers into the interior of the country as well. Evacuated in 1965, troops reoccupied the old French military base at Bouar, in the west. Finally, as well as the French advisers installed in all key administrative positions of the state, a safe pair of hands was needed at the very heart of power, the presidency. The keystone of this neo-colonial resumption of control in the CAR was lieutenant-colonel Jean-Claude Manton, a member of the French secret service (DGSE). He was quickly nicknamed the proconsul, because the proliferation of his duties made him the de facto ruler of the CAR for thirteen years.

A. TRIBALISATION UNDER FRENCH TUTELAGE

Jean-Claude Manton arrived in Bangui on 2 December 1980. His mission was as vague as it was important. He had to protect David Dacko, including from Dacko himself. Under pressure from a virulent opposition led by Ange-Félix Patassé’s MPLC and a population anxious for real change, the president slipped into longer and longer periods of depression. His back to the wall, even though he had all the state’s resources at his disposal and the support of France, he campaigned for re-election in what was more like a plebiscite a posteriori about his return to power imposed by Paris. On 1 September 1981, the official results of the second round gave him such a small lead (50.2 per cent) over his challenger Ange-Félix Patassé (90,000 votes) that the days following the election augured some tough battles.

Nervous, David Dacko did not feel he could face them. Learning from his unsuccessful waiting game in 1965, he took a surprising initiative. He told Jean-Claude Manton that he intended of his own free will to hand over power to the military. He asked his French guardian angel not to intervene and simply asked Manton to alert Paris about this freely consented coup.³³ It was in these conditions that the FACA Chief of Staff, General André Kolingba, 45, formed a Military Committee for National Recovery (CMRN) to govern the country. Jean-Claude

³² Cf. Faes and Smith, “La solitude et le chaos”, op. cit., p. 291.

³³ Ibid.

Mantion had a new boss but there was certainly no change in his mission. He continued to supervise the new head of state in the same way he had done the previous one. Moreover, he soon had the opportunity to prove his usefulness. On 3 March 1982, after strengthening his control over the Presidential Guard, he foiled an attempted coup instigated by Ange-Félix Patassé and two prominent brigadiers, François Bozizé and Alphonse Mbaïkoua. The officers fled: Bozizé to Chad, Mbaïkoua to his home village, Markounda, on the border with Chad.

As for Bokassa's ex-prime minister, who was also from the north and now transformed into demagogic leader of the opposition, he managed to find refuge in the French embassy, disguised as a Muslim trader, his robe draped over a moped. His presence was extremely embarrassing. How was France going to be able to help its friend in power get rid of a coup leader who was very popular in Bangui, without provoking a riot? Negotiations spread over two weeks with Paris's official representative and ambassador on one side of the table, and his compatriot and DGSE agent, Jean-Claude Mantion, representing the CAR president on the other. This situation summarises the uniqueness of this post-colonial moment: France negotiating with France in the CAR of the 1980s, since France was everywhere and on all sides. In this case, France reached an agreement with itself to provide safe conduct to Patassé, so that he could go into exile in Togo.³⁴

A rather insignificant figure, General Kolingba gladly delegated swathes of his power to Jean-Claude Mantion, in whom he had confidence. However, while the watchful eye of Paris ensured the smooth operation of the state, the president was busy with what, in his eyes, was the main business: the affairs of his family, in the broadest sense of the word, starting with the Yakoma, his own ethnic group, which formed less than 5 per cent of the population and lived along the River Oubangui, opposite their more numerous relations in Congo-Kinshasa. So while Mantion negotiated the departure of Patassé at the French embassy, General Kolingba gave orders to blow up the houses of his opponent and his close associates in Bangui.

He also sent two Yakoma brothers-in-arms to the home regions of his enemies that were involved in the attempted coup. The first punitive expedition was led by General Djambo, who razed and burned several villages around Paoua, the village where Patassé was born.³⁵ The other was led by General Mazi to Markounda. "Given the impossibility of distinguishing opponents from peaceable inhabitants, General Mazi decided on a radical solution. The village of Markounda was burned to the ground and

many people were massacred. These events provoked the Kaba's long-lasting hatred of the Yakoma. The north-south divide was born and would later be used politically by Patassé, to divide the people of the savannah from the people of the river".³⁶

As a good general, André Kolingba also occupied himself with the army, particularly the Presidential Guard. It was here, in security matters, at the heart of Jean-Claude Mantion's sphere of influence, that one can best judge whether the head of state's "white adviser" (at the time, a natural target for attacks by the CAR opposition and international media), was all-powerful in reality or whether this was an illusion. Despite the presence of "Lucky Luke", Mantion's other local nickname, it was the tribalism of his boss that should have caused a scandal: while the French secret agent carried out the tasks of a prime minister in the shadows, the president appointed his Yakoma relations to positions in the state apparatus and parastatal companies.

"He invented ethnicity, if one understands by that the manipulation of tribalism for political ends, in a country united by a true lingua franca, Sango, and in which the origin of people had not had any importance for some time".³⁷ This infiltration seriously destabilised the FACA, with lasting repercussions. When he left power in 1993 after a twelve-year reign, André Kolingba, a teacher imbued with unique skills for ethnic manipulation, left his successors a national army 70 per cent of which was drawn from his own tiny ethnic minority.³⁸

The fall of the Berlin Wall, which ended the Cold War, France's retreat from its role as policeman of francophone Africa and the implementation of what the French press called "paristroika" – in reference to perestroika, the parallel process by which the USSR abandoned its eastern Europe bloc, which until then had just as limited sovereignty as the former French colonies in Africa – were tectonic forces that Kolingba could not resist. On 22 April 1991, André Kolingba conceded a multiparty system that was ratified by constitutional reform in July. "I did it because those who pay us asked me to", he told national radio straightforwardly, in Sango. He knew very well that this was the death knell for his government.³⁹

³⁴ Crisis Group interview, French official in Paris, May 2007.

³⁵ Cf. Jean-Paul Ngoupandé, *L'Afrique sans la France* (Paris, 2002), pp. 12-13.

³⁶ Typed narrative of a witness to the events, given to Crisis Group in Bangui, July 2007.

³⁷ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Bangui, July 2007.

³⁸ Crisis Group interview, General Henri-Alain Guillou, the French adviser given responsibility for reorganising President Bozizé's FACA, Bangui, July 2007. See also "Marchés Tropicaux", *Spécial Centrafrique*, No. 2940, 15 March 2002, p. 556.

³⁹ "Le président Kolingba concède le multipartisme", Reuters, 23 April 1991.

However, he also knew that he would not be able to maintain power without the massive and multi-faceted support of France. From June 1990, when the France-Africa summit meeting took place in La Baule, President François Mitterrand conditioned French aid on progress towards democratisation in Africa. In this new context, the proconsul in Bangui looked out of place at the side of a military man who gave positions to members of his ethnic group in such a way as to bleed his country, one of the poorest and most exploited on the continent. Therefore, André Kolingba had to consent to what was, from his point of view, the same as assisted suicide: pluralist elections, with no cheating, which he could only lose. From Paris's point of view, the end of the Manton era in Bangui was an inevitable necessity. However, the French authorities had no illusions about the democratic process in the CAR. They also feared what effect the forced departure of General Kolingba would have on the stability of this nerve-centre for the French forces already in place on the continent.

Democratisation in Bangui followed the course set out by Paris. Between 1 and 20 August, a great national debate promoted discussion of the past before Central Africans went to the polls between 22 August and 19 September 1993 for pluralist and indisputably free and fair legislative and presidential elections, the first in the country's history. André Kolingba would have liked to have derailed the process by annulling, in extremis, an election in 1992 and pardoning the ex-emperor Bokassa between the two rounds of voting in 1993, in the hope of causing chaos by releasing him from prison. However, France was careful to promote democracy, just as it had previously taken care to perpetuate the regimes it put in place. Finally, it successfully did its utmost to ensure the logistics and fairness of what was an exemplary election, with many helicopter flights, international observers and transparent ballot boxes. This was the goal and it was achieved.

What did it matter now that the successful candidate, Ange-Félix Patassé, who triumphed over the Socialist Abel Goumba in the second round with 52.5 per cent of the vote, had in the past been violently anti-French and instigated coups; that he had organised the coronation of his political mentor, Bokassa, who he tried to resemble to the point of mimicking him; that he was an incredible demagogue, having conducted his campaign by promising a machine to make banknotes for every village where the majority voted in his favour.⁴⁰ France was "tired of influencing the fortunes of its former African colonies".⁴¹ It was certainly hoping that a free and fair election would pave the way to a more democratic future in Central

Africa, although it did not believe that that was what would really happen. On the other hand, it saw the indisputably fair election as a "goodbye present from a protecting power for who it was high time to withdraw from a country that had theoretically been independent for 33 years".⁴²

B. DEMOCRACY AND CHAOS

On its slow progress to sovereignty, the CAR passed a milestone in 1993. For the first time since independence, the will of the people was freely expressed. Ange-Félix Patassé's victory was a democratic change of government. It broke with the tradition of sham elections that, during the Cold War, invariably left a strongman in the presidency who would only leave if forced to, as the victim of a coup.⁴³ For this reason, the pleonasm "democratically elected" came into use when elections in Africa ceased to be plebiscites for single candidates or competitions decided in advance. Ange-Félix Patassé prided himself on this new glorious title, which he mistakenly believed (and he was not the only one) gave him a free hand in government.

What was even more unfortunate was that after three presidents from the south since independence (David Dacko and Jean Bedel Bokassa, both Mbaka, and André Kolingba, a Yakoma), he was the first politician from the north to become head of state. This fact, in itself, was hardly important. But it acquired great political significance from the moment it promoted or was perceived to promote the kind of political polarisation – the people of the savannah against the people of the river – that the new head of state went on to greatly exacerbate, whether by ineptitude or design.

"One can only democratise with democrats, and the prevailing tribal arithmetic on the occasion of the democratic election was not enough to transform a cacique of the Bokassa system into an artisan of democratic change". This judgement, by Jean-Paul Ngoupandé,⁴⁴ condemns Ange-Félix Patassé out of hand. However,

⁴² Crisis Group interview, former French minister for cooperation, Paris, June 2007.

⁴³ This was not limited to Central Africa. Until the fall of the Berlin Wall, during 30 years of independence in Africa, the only leader to have left power after being defeated in an election was the Mauritian Prime Minister, Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, in 1982.

⁴⁴ *Chronique*, op. cit., p. 8. Born in 1949, a Mandja from the centre, Jean-Paul Ngoupandé, a university student, had been general secretary of the single party and Minister of Education under Kolingba. Prime minister of a government of national unity in 1996-1997, he confronted President Patassé in a conflict-ridden period of government cohabitation.

⁴⁰ Information supplied by Géraldine Faes, who covered the presidential campaign for the weekly, *Jeune Afrique*.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, French diplomat, Paris, July 2007.

Patassé inherited an onerous legacy on coming to power: his army was a tribal militia and he was not entirely wrong in sensing it was hostile to him. At first, he sought to guarantee his personal security by transferring the Yakoma in the Presidential Guard into the ranks of the FACA. This aroused discontent among those concerned, who had been given preferential treatment under the former government.

The discontent of the military became more general when it transpired that the new presidential security force was also a tribal militia, only this time almost exclusively constituted of Sara-Kaba, the new head of state's northern ethnic "family". In the context of an unprecedented social crisis, the rivalry between this praetorian guard and the "ramshackle" troops of the FACA went on to cause a series of mutinies that finished off the process of destroying the CAR's economy.

1. Mutiny after mutiny

The honeymoon period only lasted a short time. In the euphoria of taking up his post, Ange-Félix Patassé managed to pay twelve months of wages in arrears owing to civil servants, although successive non-payments quickly built up the arrears again. Social exasperation reached the ranks of the army. On 18 April 1996, about 200 soldiers of the Operational Defence of the Territory Regiment (*Régiment de défense opérationnelle du territoire, RDOT*) demonstrated in support of their demands for three months of unpaid wages. They occupied the radio station, took several prominent personalities hostage and tried to attack the presidency. The Presidential Guard confronted them and the resulting clash left seven dead and about 40 wounded. The French soldiers at the Béal base patrolled Bangui to protect foreign nationals. Without any military margin for manoeuvre, the mutineers ended their movement, which lasted four days.⁴⁵

One month later, on 18 May 1996, a rumour (it was never known whether it was true or false) that the gun room at the RDOT's Kasai base had been taken over by the Presidential Guard provoked another explosion of anger within the FACA. This time, the mutiny lasted eleven days and involved several hundred soldiers. Led by non-commissioned officers, their demands were more political. At the same time, Bangui was looted, with the enthusiastic participation of many outcasts in the capital. The French army organised a major operation, "Almandin II",⁴⁶ to evacuate several thousand foreign nationals. It also saved the Mocaf brewery, owned by the French group Castel, from being looted. The violence was

significantly greater than in April, with 43 dead and 238 wounded. Once again, deployment of the French forces compelled the mutineers to negotiate with the government.

A government of national unity, led by Jean-Paul Ngoupandé, was put in place. During its eight months of existence, it managed to organise a national conference on the army's reform, in preparation for overhauling the FACA with the aid of French cooperation, and to get all the political parties (about 30) to agree to a minimum common program. However, a third mutiny, begun on 15 November 1996, neutralised the effects of these efforts. After a minor incident, hundreds of soldiers swarmed into town to take control of Bangui's riverside southern suburbs. Once again, the French army intervened to stop the military escalation. However, this time, it took longer to pick up the threads of dialogue, the capital remained divided for long weeks and two French soldiers – an officer and a non-commissioned officer on patrol – were shot in the back at one of the mutineers' roadblocks.⁴⁷

The toll taken by the French army's reprisals will never be known. According to reliable CAR sources, it was "several dozen civilians, caught in the crossfire with mutineers trying to find shelter in the suburbs".⁴⁸ This punitive intervention provoked a strong reaction from the then first secretary of the Socialist party, Lionel Jospin, in Paris. He labelled it as the kind of interventionism that belonged to a previous period and called for respect for the "African dead". His declaration broke with the usual consensus observed by French politicians with regard to military operations in Africa.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, leaders of human rights organisations, Bangui, 17 July 2007.

⁴⁹ Here is the verbatim of his statement to the press, on 6 January 1997: "I am very concerned about the situation in the Central African Republic. Naturally, our forces must ensure their security and it is with sadness that I receive the death of two French soldiers. Our forces must also ensure the safety of our nationals. However, we must also reflect on the African dead, especially if they were civilians. I fear there will be a rise of powerful anti-French sentiment in Central Africa. The problem is knowing what missions our government is entrusting to our soldiers. The defence agreement with the Central African Republic, which is invoked here, is not a policing arrangement. The French army cannot be transformed either into an internal security force or a presidential guard for President Patassé. We have already intervened militarily in Central Africa twice, in April and in May of last year. We can only observe that President Patassé, although he certainly won the election, does not behave in a democratic manner and is unable to stabilise the situation in his country. If we wanted to avoid the kind of interventionism typical of times past and the risk of a military escalation, a political solution must be found. It

⁴⁵ "1996/97 : trois mutineries successives", Agence France-Presse, 28 May 2001.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Although this was not followed up, this beginning of public debate revealed the dilemma that had faced the French government since the beginning of the flurry of mutinies in Bangui. The choice seemed to be Cornelian: should it look on, without raising a finger, as mutineers took power, at the risk of being criticised for deserting a democratically elected president who had long been considered anti-French? Or should it play the role of policeman of Africa and run to the assistance of Ange-Félix Patassé, even though he was responsible for so many abuses of power, large-scale corruption and political assassination?⁵⁰

In the end, the French authorities tried to extricate themselves from the situation by a two-part initiative: first, they increased the French military presence in Bangui from 1,400 to 2,300 in order to protect the constitutional order, by force if necessary; then, they passed responsibility to an international peacekeeping force with a view to repatriating French troops when the situation calmed down. It was hoped that this “one step forward and two steps back” solution would protect Paris from further accusations of both interference and desertion. However, it also carried the risk of being accused of both at the same time.

2. Generalised anomie

France took a first step in this scenario by convening a French-African summit meeting in Ouagadougou, in December 1996. At the request of France, six African countries (Burkina Faso, Gabon, Mali, Senegal, Chad and Togo) agreed to contribute military contingents to a regional peacekeeping force, the future Inter-African Commission to Monitor Implementation of the Bangui Accords (MISAB). The Bangui Accords were signed on 25 January 1997 under the mediation of the ex- and future president of Mali, General Amadou Toumani Touré, who was also mandated to supervise their implementation. Almost in the same breath, 750 MISAB soldiers were deployed in the CAR capital. France covered the bulk of the cost of this operation (the equivalent of €10,000 per month) as well as the logistics on the ground.⁵¹

requires dialogue between the Central African government and the opposition. Perhaps recourse to universal suffrage is once again needed, should Central Africans so decide. I call on the French government to officially inform the French and their representatives about the policy followed by our country in Central Africa”, *Le Monde*, 7 January 1997.

⁵⁰ The French authorities were especially affected by the assassination, on 4 December 1996, of General Kolingba’s former Minister of the Interior, Christophe Grelombe, and his son Martin, tortured in the presidential palace before being finished off on wasteland by the Presidential Guard that the French military were supposed to supervise.

⁵¹ “1996/97 : trois mutineries successives”, Agence France-

In general, the operation was a success, even though the peacekeeping force could not prevent new clashes in Bangui, in May and June 1997. These clashes claimed about 100 victims and forced 60,000 people to flee their homes and find refuge around the city. Moreover, after the death of a Senegalese soldier, MISAB followed the example of the French a few months previously and was guilty of indiscriminate reprisals, firing heavy weapons into several neighbourhoods of Bangui (practically one quarter of the town), used by the mutineers as a human shield.⁵²

The anomie of the CAR had deteriorated. Violently challenged from abroad and emptied of their republican content within the country, the state’s institutions were henceforth bypassed, including by the president. He created a special force, outside the army, that was given responsibility to pacify the north of the country, which was in the throes of growing insecurity, because of the *zaraguinas* (road-cutters)⁵³ and the beginning of guerrilla warfare in the area. This unit, soon accused of serious atrocities by local human rights organisations, was placed under the command of Martin Koumtamadj, better known as Colonel Abdoulaye Miskine, who had been a commando (*codo*) in the south of Chad.

Moreover, Ange-Félix Patassé recruited about 30 private security agents – or mercenaries – through Captain Paul Barril, the former number two of the Élysée anti-terrorist unit, to ensure his own personal security.⁵⁴ Finally, as it was scarcely possible to recruit more men for the Presidential Guard, which already numbered 1000, the head of state financed a personal militia, the *Karako*, which means peanuts in Sango. This allusion to the crop grown only in the north widened the gap with the people of the river, who felt targeted.

The reform and professionalisation of the French army decided on by President Chirac served as a timely pretext

Presse, 28 May 2001.

⁵² Cf. “Bangui, sens dessus dessous”, *L’Autre Afrique*, 25 June 1997. The article noted the “dozens of deaths”. Cf. also “L’épilogue” that J-P. Ngoupandé devoted to this subject in his *Chronique*, op. cit., pp. 251-260.

⁵³ The term *zaraguinas* is used to describe the phenomenon of banditry that became endemic in the second half of the 1990s. This development was linked to the failures of the state, which, due to a lack of institutional capacity, could no longer ensure the attributes of sovereignty, starting with the protection of its people and borders and the defence of its monopoly of legitimate violence. In this context, local people have set up self-defence groups, armed with traditional weapons (“archers”). Local human rights organisations accuse them of summary executions.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, close colleague of Captain Barril, Paris, June 2007.

to justify closure of the military bases in the CAR. On 31 July 1997, the French minister of defence, the socialist Alain Richard, travelled to Bangui to inform Ange-Félix Patassé about Operation Stork: the withdrawal of French forces within one year. Despite the form of words used by Richard,⁵⁵ and his promise to keep 70 military advisers in the country to train the FACA, the CAR president was not fooled, especially as French troops remained in neighbouring Chad, where Operation Sparrowhawk continued even though it had been “temporary” since 1978.

At first, Ange-Félix Patassé limited himself to consideration of this fait accompli. Then, furious at being “dropped” by Paris, he resorted to a clumsy act of blackmail. At the end of September, instead of opening negotiations to get France to pay for his exit ticket, he threatened to throw out the EFAO, even though he did not have the means to do so. He publicly requested the United States to take France’s place as a protecting power, but that country took no notice of his request. It was in these circumstances that the French military presence, which had been in the CAR for more than a century, came to an end on 11 December 1997 in Bouar and 7 March 1998 in Bangui.

Initially, 200 French soldiers remained at the M’Poko airbase in Bangui to support MISAB and await the deployment of the UN peacekeeping force. On 27 March 1998, the UN Security Council decided to send 1,350 blue helmets to the CAR. The news was welcomed in Paris with relief. The unanimous adoption of Resolution 1159 could not be taken for granted. The U.S. Congress was hostile because of the cost of the operation. However, their reluctance ended after patient lobbying by France and because the vote coincided with President Bill Clinton’s trip to Africa, which would have made a refusal by Washington to accept its responsibilities for peace on the continent rather embarrassing.⁵⁶

At that point, the 200 French soldiers in Bangui changed their beret for a blue helmet and became, in the eyes of the population “barracudas” in disguise. On 15 April, MISAB, which had lost eight soldiers (including six in combat) and suffered 27 other casualties, gave way to the 1,350 strong UN Mission for the Central African Republic (MINURCA). The initial mandate of the blue helmets

was limited to ensuring security in Bangui for three months.⁵⁷ But there was no doubt that the new peacekeeping force would be called on to remain beyond that date, especially to guarantee the organisation of legislative elections in November-December 1998.

Under their guard, the opposition won the election, but the head of state bypassed this obstacle by governing by decree. Superficially, the situation in Bangui calmed down. Paris seized this window of opportunity to disengage completely and on 28 February 1999, the last French soldier left the CAR capital. “Here, you either shoot or get out. At last, we did the right thing, as far as we’re concerned”, a French officer said anonymously.⁵⁸

For the time being then, events in Bangui only concerned France from afar. On 19 September 1999, Ange-Félix Patassé won the presidential election in the first round, with 51.63 per cent of the votes – a result disputed by the opposition. However, the UN believed their mission was accomplished and withdrew the blue helmets of MINURCA on 1 April 2000, leaving in its place the UN Peace-building Office in the Central African Republic (BONUCA) with some 70 civilians and no military backup. With the deterioration of the social situation in the CAR and payment of civil servants’ wages almost 30 months in arrears, the opposition parties supported a strike by civil servants that lasted almost five months. On 15 December 2000, they demanded that the head of state should step down “in the greater interests of the nation”. They formed a coordinating committee, with a view to organising non-violent political change.⁵⁹

Five months later, violence returned to Bangui. On the night of 27-28 May 2001, a commando equipped with heavy weapons attacked the residence of President Patassé. The attack was repulsed in extremis, but clashes continued in Bangui for a week or two. General Kolingba rather confusedly claimed leadership of the coup on national radio,⁶⁰ so government supporters set to work

⁵⁷ Resolution 1159, UNSC S/RES/1159, 27 March 1998, paras. 6-7.

⁵⁸ Cf. “La France se retire de la Centrafrique”, *Libération*, 28 February 1998.

⁵⁹ Press communiqué to Bangui from the Coordination of Opposition parties, 15 December 2000.

⁶⁰ The former head of state had come second in the 1999 presidential election, with 19.36 per cent of the votes. Many witnesses of the events, interviewed by Crisis Group, think that he was then “beleaguered” and “pushed to the front” by younger officers, such as General Ndjengbot, Colonel Gamba, his own son, Lieutenant-Colonel Guy-Serge Kolingba and Major Saulet. Be that as it may, General Kolingba and his close associates, about twenty officers, were condemned to death in their absence, in August 2002. The former president

⁵⁵ At a press conference in Bangui, on 31 July 1997, Alain Richard declared: “I hope, Mr President, that during our bilateral work in the coming weeks and months, you will remember that the reorganisation of the French defence forces takes place in the context of a confirmed alliance and a permanent defence agreement. I emphasise that France respects and values this step towards autonomy, genuine independence and freedom of expression to which you referred”.

⁵⁶ Cf. “L’ONU a créé une force de maintien de la paix en République centrafricaine”, *Le Monde*, 29-30 March 1998.

flushing out his supporters in the southern suburbs of the capital. They hunted down any Yakoma they could find, killing at least 300 and forcing 50,000 residents of the capital to flee their homes.⁶¹

The political balance sheet of this “coup too far”⁶² was equally serious. Ange-Félix Patassé managed to retain his position in power, especially thanks to the intervention of 100 Libyan soldiers sent to him by Colonel Qaddafi at his request. However, independently of any considerations of legitimate defence following the attack on his person, he became increasingly paranoid. He suspected plots everywhere and halted contacts, including with the legal and legalist opposition, provoking exactly what he aimed to avoid: the end of peaceful political competition and the strengthening of permanent rebellion.

IV. UNDER REGIONAL CONTROL

The “coup too far” of May 2001, the attempted assassination of President Patassé and the subsequent indiscriminate repression meted out by the threatened regime contained the seeds of all the elements of instability that henceforth maintained a climate of violence and institutional failure in the CAR. The first element, but not the least important, was the confusion: who was behind the coup? What were their motives and intentions and why did they see force as their only option? As the weeks went by, conjecture about the “Kolingba coup” promoted endless speculation about conspiracies and a formless feeling of general distrust that would result in a new form of domination, this time, regional.

A. THE FALL OF ANGE-FÉLIX PATASSÉ

On 26 August 2001, the minister of defence, Jean-Jacques Demafouth, long-time partner in crime of President Patassé,⁶³ was relieved of his post and arrested. He was alleged to be the leader of a coup within the coup. This raised doubts about the FACA, which, however, remained loyal on the fateful night of 27 May – a major factor noted by all observers, after the cascade of mutinies since 1996.⁶⁴ Jean-Jacques Demafouth had successfully restructured the FACA, but this was discredited after his arrest. Sure that he had the confidence of the head of state, he had reduced the presidential security force from 1,200 to 800 men, while also reducing the numbers of the FACA by a quarter, down to about 3,000 soldiers and addressing the regional imbalance between north and south. In May 2001, the percentage of soldiers from the river – essentially, the Yakoma – was no more than 40 per cent, compared to 70 per cent at the end of the Kolingba regime.⁶⁵

went into exile in Uganda. Crisis Group interviews, Bangui, July 2007.

⁶¹ Cf. communiqué of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), 15 June 2001, which also echoed reports of the decapitation of an opposition deputy, Théophile Touba. A statement by the president of the National Assembly, Luc Appolinaire Dondon Konamabaye, the deputy head of state, bears witness to the anti-Yakoma hysteria of May-June 2001 in Bangui. He believed that the efforts towards reconciliation “have collapsed like a house of cards, because of the action of an exogenous assimilated and integrated minority, imbued with supremacy and hungry for power”. Cf. “Droits de l’Homme en République centrafricaine. Discours et réalité : un fossé béant”, FIDH, Report 324, February 2002.

⁶² Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Bangui, July 2007.

⁶³ Born in 1960, Jean-Jacques Demafouth’s mother was a Banziri from the east and his father a Banda from the centre west. He was a lawyer by training and had been responsible for intelligence under Ange-Félix Patassé before being appointed minister of defence. According to a former French ambassador in Bangui, the idea of a coup would not have been unusual for him. He had even explicitly said as much (“I could shoot Patassé, I have access to his bedroom. What would France offer me?”). Questioned on 25 June 2007 in Paris, where he lives in exile, Jean-Jacques Demafouth denied having had such ideas and gave a radical reinterpretation of events: “The coup in 2001 was a sham organised by Patassé himself, a pretext to repress the opposition”. Crisis Group interview, Jean-Jacques Demafouth, Paris, June 2007.

⁶⁴ “Restructurée, l’armée de la RCA est restée loyale à Patassé”, Agence France-Presse, 31 May 2001.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, two French military cooperation officials, Bangui, July 2007.

1. Suspicions about coups and the collapse of the army as an institution

This delicate reform was based on the FACA's confidence in the minister of defence, awareness that he had the Presidential Guard under control and gratitude that he ensured regular payment of their wages and even partial payment of arrears at a time when all other civil servants were on a long strike in support of their demands for payment of wages in arrears. With Demafouth under arrest, the patient reorganisation of the army was disowned. Even worse, to date, every new attempt to do the same thing seems to be compromised. In a display of political nonsense, Jean-Jacques Demafouth was cleared of any suspicion by the CAR judiciary on 7 October 2002.

The acquittal of the former minister of defence came at a time when President Patassé had identified a new hidden hand behind the May 2001 coup: the FACA chief of staff, General François Bozizé.⁶⁶ He was dismissed on 26 October 2001, one week after banning, for illegal operation, the Evangelist Church (Le Christianisme céleste Nouvelle Jérusalem) that the army leader had co-founded. On 3 November, an attempt to arrest General Bozizé failed. The chief of staff took refuge with about a hundred loyal supporters –mainly officers of his ethnic group – in the barracks of the Territorial Infantry Battalion (BIT), adjoining his residence in Gabongo, a northern suburb of Bangui.

On 7 November, in violation of an agreement negotiated with General Lamine Cissé, the officer in charge of BONUCA, who had led a goodwill mission to dispel the acute attention in Bangui – Ange-Félix Patassé tried again to arrest the traitorous general. But troops from his Presidential Guard, supported by Libyan soldiers, once again returned empty-handed. François Bozizé had escaped and fled northwards, reaching Chad the next day. From then on, insecurity reigned in northern CAR, which, as the months went by, became a no-go area in the grip of the banditry of road-cutters and Chad commando units in search of booty. Exiled in France,

General Bozizé claimed the birth of a rebel guerrilla group under his orders.

In Bangui, the cocktail of factors generating instability became more complex: to the appeal for foreign armed forces were added suspicions of a coup and the institutional collapse of the army. To fill the vacuum created by the departure of French troops and avoid domination by his peers in power in neighbouring countries, who he knew were very close to Paris, Ange-Félix Patassé appealed to the regional organisation formed by Colonel Qaddafi, the Community of Sahel Saharan States (CEN-SAD). In December 2001, a CEN-SAD peacekeeping force of about 300 men⁶⁷ was deployed in Bangui to make the CAR capital secure. In August 2002, General Kolingba and his co-conspirators were condemned to death in their absence. At a summit meeting on 2 October, anxious to reaffirm its regional pre-eminence, the Central African Economic and Monetary Union (CEMAC) got the green light from President Patassé to replace the CEN-SAD troops by its own peacekeeping force. However, three weeks later, on 25 October 2002, supporters of General Bozizé commemorated the first anniversary of their leader's dismissal by staging a lightning raid on Bangui.

Although they had little more than 150 soldiers, they entered the northern suburbs of the CAR capital, from where they were only driven back, in extremis, by the intervention of Libyan forces and several hundred combatants of the Movement for the Liberation of Congo (MLC), reinforcements sent by the main Congo rebel leader, Jean-Pierre Bemba, to help Patassé remain in power. France reacted in two ways. President Chirac's adviser on Africa, Michel de Bonnecorse, immediately telephoned the Chad president, Idriss Déby, and asked him to expel François Bozizé, who was about to join his forces in the field.⁶⁸ The former CAR head of state had left France, where he had been under surveillance by the intelligence services (DST) and crossed into Belgium.

Secondly, Paris urged Colonel Qaddafi to repatriate his troops from Bangui and, in particular, to withdraw the two Marchetti aircraft that had bombarded the northern suburbs of the CAR capital in an attempt to dislodge Bozizé's supporters. This request was transmitted to the Libyan leader by the Algerian president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika.⁶⁹ Such close cooperation between France and several Central African countries (Chad, the two Congos

⁶⁶ Detailed testimony by two ambassadors posted in Bangui at that time points to the former chief of staff harbouring vague coup desires. He had already co-organised an abortive coup in 1982 against President Kolingba. However, no evidence has been uncovered that suggests a coup was being prepared. A Gbaya, born in 1946 in Bongonsi near Bossangoa (Ouham prefecture), François Bozizé received his military training at Bouar, then in Fréjus, in the south of France. Aide-de-camp of Bokassa, he owed his rapid rise in the army to the former emperor. Arrested and extradited by Benin in 1989, tortured and imprisoned in Bangui, he was released in 1991. In 1993, he was a candidate in the presidential elections won by Ange-Félix Patassé. The latter appointed him head of the army in 1997.

⁶⁷ This regional force was composed of three contingents: about 50 Djibouti soldiers and two companies of around 120 men dispatched by Libya and Sudan.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, former member of the Élysée Africa unit, Paris, June 2007. General Bozizé was in fact put on a plane to France, on 27 October.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

and Gabon) made it seem legitimate to talk of a joint “plan” to press President Patassé to negotiate with General Bozizé, if not to replace the head of state by his former chief of staff.

The day after the rebel “descent” on Bangui, relations between the CAR and Chad deteriorated. On 9 November 2002, Ange-Félix Patassé accused Idriss Déby of fomenting an armed attempt to annexe the north of the country and take control of its oil – the supposed extension of southern Chad’s oilfields, near Doba, where exploitation of the oil was just beginning. Forty-eight hours later, the Chad president denounced “the massacre of many Chad civilians, at least 120”, after loyalists and their Congolese allies retook control of the northern suburbs of Bangui.⁷⁰ There is no doubt that civilians were massacred. Three months later, on 14 February 2003, the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), lodged a complaint with the International Criminal Court (ICC), which had only just had judges appointed and had not even had its inaugural meeting. The FIDH made accusations against Ange-Félix Patassé, Colonel Abdoulaye Miskine, in charge of pacifying the north by the CAR president, and the Congolese rebel leader, Jean-Pierre Bemba.

In addition to the massacre of about 200 residents of Bangui, the FIDH discovered a campaign of rape. 600 cases had been investigated, and evidence provided by many eyewitnesses. It was regrettable that the human rights defenders did not exercise the same level of vigilance with regard to François Bozizé’s supporters.⁷¹ The latter had also called in foreign forces, from Chad in this case, who plundered the cotton ginning mills in the north, religious missions, hospitals, schools and the rare private permanent houses, often taking the booty (machine tools, vehicles, furniture, etc.) back to Chad. Reliable witnesses reported the indiscriminate killing of civilians, mock executions and rape.⁷² However, in the absence of detailed investigations, it is impossible to quantify the number of victims.

The Patassé regime was brought to a close thanks to a series of *faux pas* by the CAR president, who desperately but vainly tried to escape from the plan ratified by France and its allies in the region. To force Bangui into a national dialogue without preconditions, Paris and CEMAC (Central African Economic and Monetary Community) weakened the government and encouraged its opponents, including those who had taken up arms. Moreover, this distinction became less clear when, on 7 December

2002, the Coordination of Central African Patriots (CPC) was created in Paris. The former director of Prime Minister Jean-Paul Ngoupandé’s cabinet, Karim Meckassoua,⁷³ was appointed secretary general. The opposition in exile flocked to General Bozizé, while domestic opponents had to adopt a more prudent attitude while waiting for events to develop before being able to openly join in the push for victory. This became possible with the departure, in December 2002, of the Libyan military and CEN-SAD forces, which were replaced by about 300 CEMAC soldiers.

Ange-Félix Patassé did not trust them and tried to involve France. As a security measure, in the dangerous context of the national dialogue that Paris was asking him to begin, he asked for a military bodyguard. “There are French soldiers in Côte d’Ivoire, why not in the CAR?”, he publicly asked, on 5 February 2002. “It’s discrimination. I am asking France to send us soldiers”.⁷⁴ As this was from a man who tried to precipitate the departure of French soldiers from Central Africa in 1997, Paris turned a deaf ear. However, finally, Ange-Félix Patassé himself sealed the fate of his regime by a headlong rush to send his troops, supported by Jean-Pierre Bemba’s troops, to retake control of the north. They managed to retake Bossangoa, the stronghold of the rebellion since November 2001. Flushed with success, the president refused to allow General Bozizé to participate in the national dialogue, which then became an exercise in futility.

2. Regional deployment

Paris then gave the thumbs down, or at least, it did not interfere.⁷⁵ The regional cooperation that brought down Ange-Félix Patassé was exemplary:⁷⁶ without hindrance, General Bozizé evaded his police escort in France and made his way to Chad. In N’Djamena, President Idriss Déby, who had just denounced “a manhunt” and even a “plan to exterminate Chadians” at the time of the government’s counter-offensive in northern CAR⁷⁷,

⁷³ At the time of the “government of national unity”, Karim Meckassoua, who was one of the country’s most brilliant leaders and has lived in Paris for a long time, was arrested and beaten up by Ange-Félix Patassé’s Presidential Guard on 19 January 1997.

⁷⁴ “Le président Patassé réclame l’envoi de soldats français”, Agence France-Presse, 5 February 2002.

⁷⁵ Accounts gathered by Crisis Group, in Paris and Bangui, do not allow us to say whether France gave the green light to overthrow Ange-Félix Patassé. However, to say the least, as a former member of the Elysée “Africa Unit” admitted, “it gave an orange light”. Crisis Group interview, former member of the Elysée “Africa Unit”, Paris, June 2007.

⁷⁶ This reconstruction of the coup from the inside is based on accounts provided anonymously by several close associates of General Bozizé, who were eyewitnesses of the events described.

⁷⁷ Cf. “Idriss Déby dénonce des massacres de Tchadiens en RCA”, Reuters, 11 November 2002.

⁷⁰ Cf. “Idriss Déby dénonce des massacres de Tchadiens en RCA”, Reuters, 11 November 2002.

⁷¹ Several diplomats interviewed by Crisis Group in Bangui in July 2007 expressed such regrets.

⁷² Crisis Group interviews, religious dignitaries, Bangui, July 2007.

placed personnel from his “Force 4” Presidential Guard at Bozizé’s disposal; Joseph Kabila, head of state of Congo-Kinshasa, supplied the necessary armaments; and his neighbour on the other bank of the Congo, President Denis Sassou Nguesso, funded the operation to the tune of 3 billion FCFA (about €4.6 million). President Omar Bongo of Gabon, the most senior figure in the region, only gave his blessing at the last minute, because he doubted the capacity of Bozizé, who he had known a long time.⁷⁸ However, at the insistence of his wife Edith, daughter of President Sassou Nguesso, he overcame his reluctance.

From then on, events moved quickly. With only a handful of CAR officers, the most senior of which was a captain,⁷⁹ and troops, four fifths of whom were Chadians, General Bozizé took power in Bangui. On 15 March 2003, two rebel columns met to seize the capital. They encountered no organised resistance. In the absence of President Patassé, who had left the country to participate in a CEN-SAD summit meeting, the CAR army did not lift a finger. Meanwhile, CEMAC forces had received instructions to not oppose Bozizé’s supporters’ entry into the city.⁸⁰ Finally, France flatly refused President Patassé’s formal request to apply the defence agreement between the two countries, claiming, “you cannot defend an empty palace”.⁸¹

However, it sent 300 soldiers, officially to protect the French community and foreign nationals in Bangui. In fact, Operation Boali, later to become an Operational Instruction Detachment (DIO)⁸² and still active, helped stabilise the new regime. The children in the streets of the CAR capital were not mistaken. They were soon calling

the French military *Cudali*, “barracuda heads”. After only four years away, the French army was back in Bangui.

General Bozizé arrived in Bangui on 15 March 2003. Soon after, he announced a national recovery program and extended his hand to all the country’s political forces that were ready to support “the popular insurrection of 15 March”. The resident opposition leader, the socialist Abel Goumba, put another slant on it by talking of a popular revolution. On 23 March, General Bozizé, head of state and minister of defence, called on him to lead a consensual transition as prime minister. As planned under the former regime, a national dialogue was organised to discuss and review the past. On 11 December 2003, six weeks after this rhetorical catharsis that had no great consequence,⁸³ Abel Goumba was dismissed. The “Mr Clean” of CAR politics, age 77, left his post without making a scene. He was appointed Ombudsperson of the Republic, a post that had just been created, by presidential decree.

During this period, in Bangui and, even more so, in the interior of the country, “the popular insurrection of 15 March” revealed its true face. In the capital, General Bozizé’s accession to power was accompanied by a wave of looting by the liberators, who completed their task by exacting payment from the conquered country. In comparison with the atrocities committed by the Congolese MLC rebels, the pillage of the city by Chad mercenaries appeared to be more the work of professionals. Although 600 vehicles were requisitioned and driven north and the women of Bangui were systematically relieved of their jewellery, there is no record of much gratuitous violence or rape. Nevertheless, the Central Africans suffered the harsh fate of the vanquished. They were no longer masters in their own homes, and their country fell prey to looters. People began to get angry in Bangui to the extent that François Bozizé – a general without troops who had become head of state – appealed to President Idriss Déby, who on 19 March, sent him 500 soldiers to reestablish order in the capital.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, close associate of President Bozizé and a former “liberator” of Bangui, July 2007.

⁷⁹ This was Sylvain Ndoutingaye, born on 25 May 1972, a nephew of François Bozizé who, in June 2002, had just left the military administration college in Bamako (Mali). His next most senior colleagues were lieutenants Sagbaté and Prosper Mbaye. The former was killed in the field, near Sibut. The latter, a gendarme who studied at Saint-Cyr Coëtquidan in France, later joined the government formed after 15 March 2003 and became minister of several departments at different times. This was also the case with Sylvain Ndoutingaye, promoted lieutenant-colonel and appointed minister of energy and mines.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, senior CEMAC officer, Bangui, July 2007. It was not possible to transmit orders to the Congolese contingent, who engaged the opposition in the coup’s only combat at the international airport, under the guard of the detachment from Brazzaville. They sustained the regional force’s only casualties.

⁸¹ Crisis Group interview, former member of the Elysée “Africa unit”, Paris, June 2007.

⁸² The French government renewed Operation Boali’s mandate in June 2007, a sign of continuity – at least for the moment – of France’s Africa policy after the election of Nicolas Sarkozy in May.

⁸³ In addition to asking the nation to pardon the Emperor Bokassa’s children, the national dialogue was notable for the historic reconciliation between Abel Goumba and David Dacko. The former president died at the age of 73 soon after, on 20 November 2003, in a Yaoundé hospital. After his second departure from power in 1981, he lived in a modest single-storey villa, next to the Roux military base, and an immediate neighbour of the French ambassador, on the banks of the River Oubangui. In the protective shadow of the former colonial power, he lived out the last days of a life that had not made him a wealthy man – to the extent that successive French ambassadors used to send him food supplies – but which was characterised by periods of glory interspersed with temporary declines, *Le Monde*, 25 November 2003.

Around 500 men from this Chad expeditionary force were later integrated⁸⁴ into the regional CEMAC forces, whose mandate – to ensure the security of Bangui and defend the institutions of the CAR – remained the same and was renewed on 22 March. CEMAC forces were also reinforced. At a summit meeting on 3 June 2003, the heads of state of CEMAC countries officially recognised the new government in Bangui. On 29 July, Dominique de Villepin, then head of French diplomacy, travelled to the banks of the Oubangui to confirm France's commitment to the CAR and to continuing Operation Boali. The French-African plan for the CAR had been completed.

B. THE REGIME OF GENERAL BOZIZÉ

General Bozizé's power was limited by France's tutelary influence, the patronage of France's allies in the region and, in particular, neighbouring Chad's military ascendancy – making the CAR almost into a vassal state. Only a reorganisation of the Central African Armed Forces (FACA) would have been able to modify this situation. The CAR head of state's margin of manoeuvre was therefore slim, all the more so given that the international community (from the UN to the Bretton Woods institutions and bilateral donors) imposed sometimes contradictory conditions. However, the CAR president cannot be exonerated from his share of the responsibility for the failure of the desperate attempt to save the country that he set himself as a mission. His greatest failure was to have not exercised good governance as a way of seeking redemption from having taken power by the force of arms (foreign arms, moreover).

1. Keeping it in the family

"I took power with Chad's help".⁸⁵ General Bozizé recognised his debt to N'Djamena. Neither did he make much of a mystery of the fact that the personal bodyguard that surrounded his residence and accompanied him on official outings in the city, comprised 80 Chad military personnel from President Déby's own ethnic group, the Zaghawas. Another indication of this dependence was that the CAR army's only transport aircraft was a Hercules with a Chad pilot. Even though evidence of the spoils of war were henceforth lost among Bangui's disturbing crime statistics, not a single Chadian "liberator" was

ever brought to justice and punished.⁸⁶ The impunity of General Bozizé's comrades-in-arms remained a rule without exception.

The northern neighbour's influence in the security sector showed the extent of the CAR state's double deficit: a lack of both reliable armed forces and political legitimacy. On this second point, the elections of May 2005 were of crucial importance. They were won, fair and square, by General Bozizé. The general won in the second round, with 64.6 per cent of the vote, beating Martin Ziguélé, a former prime minister under Patassé, who accepted his defeat and congratulated the winner. Meanwhile, legislative elections gave the head of state a majority in parliament. His National Convergence party (Convergence nationale or Kwa na Kwa – "work, nothing but work" in Sango) won 42 out of a total of 105 seats.

In the end, the electoral process was exemplary. However, without going into the attempts at fraud that had nearly derailed the process at the start,⁸⁷ the term "democratically elected" is only one of the two conditions necessary for undisputed legitimacy, the other being "good" use of the power won through the polls – as General Bozizé himself said when justifying his overthrow of Ange-Félix Patassé. However, the new regime did not fulfil its promises to make the judiciary independent, respect human rights, exercise power democratically and promote financial transparency and therefore failed to eradicate the memory that it had come to power through a coup.

⁸⁴ This integration was relative: the Gabonese and Congolese contingents of the CEMAC force shared the same communications system and chain of command, while the Chad contingent had its own radio and only followed orders received, or at least confirmed, from N'Djamena. Crisis Group interview, senior FOMUC officer, Bangui, July 2007.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, CAR President, Bangui, July 2007.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interviews, leaders of human rights organisations, Bangui, July 2007. Since March 2005, a single liberator, of Central African nationality, was punished by the courts. This was Armand Touaboy, judged to have opened fire on a man in a bar, after a dispute he had provoked about a young woman. He missed the target but inflicted terrible injuries on his rival by striking him with his gun. After an exceptional mobilisation of human rights defenders, in October 2005, Armand Touaboy was given a three-month suspended sentence and fined. However, this remained an isolated case. So when the inspector general of the army, Colonel Dimassy, was beaten up outside working hours in June 2007 by one of President Bozizé's two aides-de-camp, Landry Touaboy, who broke four of the colonel's ribs and a leg. The aggressor certainly lost his job as aide-de-camp and received 60 days of close arrest but was protected from charges of assault and battery.

⁸⁷ Once General Bozizé had entered the lists, the Constitutional Court in Bangui rejected seven of his twelve rival candidates. After five weeks of acute tension, mediation by the Gabonese president, Omar Bongo, ended the crisis and opened the way for elections. After the signature of the Libreville Accords on 22 January 2005, only ex-president Ange-Félix Patassé, exiled in Togo, was barred from participating. "Onze candidats en lice pour la présidentielle centrafricaine", Agence France-Presse, 8 March 2003.

According to many observers, the message from the ballot box in 2005 was twofold: first, “the voters thought that a soldier who gave his word as an officer that he would restore public order was the most likely to restore the sense of security they needed”⁸⁸; second, tired of the violence and disorder, “they gave a mandate to the whole political class by re-electing those in power in the hope they would reach an understanding with others about sharing power in a way that would allow the country to breathe again and, if possible, get back on its feet”.⁸⁹ The failure of this double mandate was not Bozizé’s fault alone, not least because he brought many prominent personalities from other backgrounds than his own into the government.

However, as analysis of the Bozizé regime reveals, real power was monopolised by the president and his close associates, most of whom were members of his immediate family or ethnic group. This family control of the centres of decision making, and therefore of the country’s resources, to some extent excuses the opposition that took up arms rather than trying to win a majority through the ballot box. In this vicious circle, which does not only affect the CAR, the armed dissidence is used to justify the regime’s reliance on the family and recourse to these supposedly more dependable supporters. In both cases, it is the civilian population that is the loser.

The unquestionably fair elections of May 2005 and existing public freedoms, which allow political objectives to be pursued legally, means there is no justification for recourse to arms in the CAR. Although it is far from perfect, there is real freedom of expression. This benefits not only the newspapers in Bangui, the print runs and distribution of which limit their audience to a small wealthy sector in the capital, but also the very popular Radio Ndeke Luka, about which the opposition leader Martin Ziguélé says, “it broadcasts every day what we would not have dared to say in private among friends, ten years ago”.⁹⁰ This changes nothing about the fact that the reins of power are firmly held by the president and his

associates, although all those who might provide political opposition to the regime have jumped on the government bandwagon. The government and the administration are full of politicians who feed from the hand of power. The president has not even stopped the supply of food to rebels who have taken up arms against him.⁹¹

Despite the free food tickets, the banquet is reserved for a “happy few” of the president’s close associates. Analysis of the list of names most frequently mentioned in this context by both foreign and CAR observers aware of the workings of the regime leads to a triple conclusion: the alveolar division of power, the strong personalisation of power and the over-representation of General Bozizé’s ethnic group, the Gbaya. We can distinguish several operational circles around President Bozizé, all of which are supported by the state’s institutional framework, while they eat away at it from the inside. They all depend on direct access to the head of state, a source of a power unhampered by rules. This is clearly true for his close friends,⁹² more distant relatives and also for the regime’s political commissars,⁹³ the people who silently get the work done⁹⁴ and their

⁹¹ One of the leaders of the Army for the Restoration of the Republic and Democracy (APRD), the rebel movement in the north west, Lieutenant Florian Ndjadder, who lives in Bamako, continues to receive the salary due to him as a member of the CAR army. When one of his close associates remarked on this incongruous fact to the head of state, the latter replied: “I do it on purpose, it is best not to burn bridges”, Crisis Group interview, Bangui, July 2007.

⁹² The following list of individuals who were most often mentioned in interviews conducted by Crisis Group in July 2007 in Bangui makes no attempt at being exhaustive: Francis Bozizé, one of the president’s sons and director of his father’s cabinet at the ministry of defence; Lt-Col Sylvain Ndoutingai, minister of finance, minister of mines and minister of Energy (he is originally from the president’s village, although often introduced as a nephew, he is not a relative of the head of state); Jean-Roger Ouefio, ex-pilot trained in the USSR, chargé d’affaires of the presidency; Cyriaque Gonda, spokesperson for the presidency and leader of a political party, a cousin of Colonel Ndoutingai; Yvette Boissonnat, minister of tourism, a cousin of President Bozizé; Mme Kofio, an adviser and sister-in-law of the head of state; Honorat Cocksiss Willibona, president of the parliamentary group of Convergence Kwa na Kwa and a cousin of François Bozizé.

⁹³ The most often mentioned names were: General Joel Sinféï Moidamseï, head of the president’s cabinet and coordinator of intelligence; Colonel Ludovic Ngaïfeï, assistant FACA chief of staff; Annette Ngaïbona, the president’s special representative; Colonel Ouandane, head of security in the presidential palace; police superintendent Nambobonna, head of counter-espionage.

⁹⁴ According to witness statements gathered by Crisis Group in July 2007 in Bangui, these are soldiers who participated in General Bozizé’s coup and who are trusted by the head of state. Some observers also call them “kadogo”, the name given to Laurent Kabila’s child firemen in neighbouring

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, Me Nicolas Tiangaye, Bangui, juillet 2007. Me Tiangaye is the former president of the National Transition Council (CNT), the interim parliament that imposed several amendments on General Bozizé’s draft constitution, including the five-year presidential term and greater powers for the Prime Minister. The constitution was adopted on 20 November 2004 with 87.2 of the votes. Me Tiangaye, a Mandja from the centre, was also president of the Central African League for Human Rights.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interview, Jean-Paul Ngoupandé, special adviser to President Bozizé and a former prime minister, Paris, June 2007.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Martin Ziguélé, leader of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Central Africa (MPLC), the main opposition party, Bangui, July 2007.

auxiliaries⁹⁵ in key administrative posts or serving as brokers at the international level.

A quick, although incomplete, survey of recent “affairs” in Bangui is enough to remove any doubts that it is President Bozizé who takes the decisions and chooses the members of his entourage. On 3 February 2007, the head of state signed a presidential decree granting three permits to prospect for oil and diamonds in a total area of 2,930.70 sq. km, to a non-governmental organisation (NGO), the Association d’Entraide Europe (ACPC), which signed a partnership agreement with the CAR government on 24 January 2007. Asked about this agreement, General Bozizé explained that the permits were granted in exchange for an agreement by the NGO to “raise funds for the CAR”.⁹⁶

In May 2007, donors of funds to the CAR, starting with France, stopped a planned forced loan of 45 million FCFA (almost €69 million) that the CAR authorities wanted to levy through the brand new Central African Securities Stock Exchange (BVMAC) on conditions incompatible with the country’s commitments to the Bretton Woods institutions. This project, which President Bozizé claimed was “not necessarily bad”, was suspended.⁹⁷

On 25 June 2007, the first stone of the “Cité Lumière Kwa na Kwa” was laid in the presence of the head of

state. This was a project supported by the ministry of tourism, Yvette Boissonnat, a relative of President Bozizé, to develop Mbongossoua Island, usually called Monkey Island, in the middle of the Oubangui. According to the promises made by the operator, IAS, a holding company based in Doha, Qatar, an ultramodern health complex, a medical training centre, a four star hotel, a five star hotel, a shopping centre, a well-stocked Museum of Africa, mosques, churches and show halls, and even a zoo would be built at a cost of 350 billion FCFA (€534 million). While waiting, IAS was granted a 5,000 sq. km zone near Canot, in the interior of CAR for the mining of diamonds. Asked about the chances of such a grandiose development project being completed on Monkey Island, which was currently deserted, and of the risk of only ever seeing the diamond mining zone becoming a reality, General Bozizé said he was “not stupid”, but added, by way of explanation: “However, we have nothing, we have to have a look at these things”.⁹⁸

On 16 July 2007, the promotion of Colonel Ndoutingai to the post of treasurer of CAR, in addition to his position as minister of both mines and energy, relaunched the soap opera that had already brought the “super-ministry” and the French oil company Total into conflict for six months. This arm wrestling match, which so irritated the Élysée that it stopped a visit by the CAR leader to Paris, is over SOGAL, the fuel storage and distribution company in the CAR. According to Total, Minister Ndoutingai wanted to “carve it up” and had had three laws passed to this effect in the CAR parliament. Total had appealed to the constitutional court in Bangui and claimed to be fighting less for its monopoly of fuel distribution in Central Africa, “the equivalent of one petrol station on a French motorway”, according to one of the oil company’s managers, but against “the law of the jungle” that the government was trying to impose.⁹⁹

In September 2007, this dispute, which Total presented as “wildcat nationalisation” and President Bozizé as “the legitimate defence of the CAR’s sovereign interests” was submitted to the World Bank, CAR donors, the Gabonese president, Omar Bongo, and General Bozizé for arbitration.¹⁰⁰ While awaiting the results of this double mediation, the CAR head of state was received on a working visit to Paris, on 19 November, after dismissing his nephew from the ministry of finance.

Congo-Kinshasa. They are Lieutenants Olivier and Papy Bozizé, sons of the president; Lieutenant Semdiro, commander of the “Éclair” company; Lieutenant Olivier Koudemon; Captain Eric Danboy, a nephew of the head of state; Captains Martin and Roger Goundoungai, relatives of Colonel Ndoutingai; and two civilians, Steve Willibo zouma and Armand Touaboy, the only liberator to have been convicted by the Central African courts for battery.

⁹⁵ General Jules Bernard Ouandé, general chief of staff of FACA; General Latakpi, director-general of the police, the key man at the ministry of the interior; Colonel Mokonikonka, coordinator of military intelligence; Colonel Danzoumi Yalo Sani, representative at the ministry of defence from where he took care of former liberators; Firmin Feindiro, state prosecutor; General Gabriel Ngaïndiro, director of customs, a military doctor by training; Francis Ganawara, director-general of state finances; Jean-Paul Samnick, a Cameroon national who also has French nationality, one of the president’s brokers; and Fabien Singay, a Rwandan Hutu, expelled from Switzerland in 1994 for “activities incompatible with his status as a diplomat” whose business card says “special adviser” to President Bozizé, a status that the latter did not recognise when asked, although he added: “Yes, it’s true, my door is open to him”, Crisis Group interview, President Bozizé, Bangui, July 2007.

⁹⁶ Ibid. The presidential decree in question was published, in facsimile, by a local newspaper, *Le Confident*, 28 March 2007.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, President Bozizé, Bangui, July 2007. This affair and its many twists and turns were revealed and followed by *La Lettre du Continent*, a confidential bimonthly published by the Indigo press group in Paris.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview, President Bozizé, Bangui, July 2007. For more details on this project, cf. the website of its instigator (<http://iasholding.com/home.html>) and *Le Confident*, 13 July 2007.

⁹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Total employee, Bangui, July 2007.

¹⁰⁰ *La Lettre du Continent*, no. 523, 30 August 2007.

2. International support

For the government in Bangui, the “international community” was broadly represented in the country by three essential interlocutors: the UN Peace-building Office in Central Africa (BONUCA) and its special representative; the UN Development Programme (UNDP), coordinator of international aid; and France, former colonial power whose influence remained dominant. Until the appointment on 12 September 2007 of the former Guinean minister of foreign affairs, François Fall, BONUCA had been led for six years by the Senegalese General Lamine Cissé, former minister of the interior at the delicate moment of the democratic handover of power in 2000, in Dakar. In Bangui, at least nominally, BONUCA was the political head of the international community, a steering group of 70 employees, without its own resources. It benefited from the excellent knowledge of the area that the special representative of the UN Secretary-General had acquired, but also suffered because of criticism that General Cissé blended in with the scenery too much and did not keep the necessary distance between himself and CAR actors.

This criticism of complacency, always expressed anonymously, struck a chord mainly in UNDP, which managed foreign aid, a complex task that followed mainly technical criteria “without political software”.¹⁰¹ There developed a rivalry between the two UN institutions, which was not helped by the ambiguous role played by France, the main donor of funds and the post-colonial power. “BONUCA, the UNDP and France are three planets in orbit around each other, without ever defining their orbits, which often overlap”, said a highly-placed Central African.¹⁰²

France remained omnipresent in the CAR, at all levels of the administration and also in the private sector (the formal economy), which has shrunk to next to nothing during the years of crisis. The overall volume of French aid to its former colony (€75 million between 2003 and 2006, or €95 million if support for the CEMAC peacekeeping force is included)¹⁰³ was modest in absolute terms, but was a lot in local terms. In addition, there was a further €8 million – not counting wages – to pay for Operation Boali¹⁰⁴ and also the complex budgeting for the cost of around 70 French technical advisers, placed in the key points of the government administration, ministerial cabinets and the Presidential Guard.

Answering directly to the head of state and minister of defence, a French general officially dealt with the “overhaul” of FACA and, in fact, with everything, although comparison with the role played not long before by Colonel Manton would be misleading given the real influence of the current holder of the position.

The person in question, General Henri-Alain Guillou, was on a one-year contract, but nevertheless briefed the head of state on technical documents about all the hot topics of the moment, from negotiations with the rebels to the “Total dossier”. He succeeded General Perez at the presidential office, after Perez dealt with the initial problems after the March 2003 coup. Perez was a figure associated with the recent past, an illustration of how France constantly reverted to its old role in Bangui. General Perez was also the last commanding officer of the “barracudas”, the EFAO, that put the key under the door of the French bases in Central Africa in 1998.

The signs of France’s recent role (neo-colonial rather than post-colonial) were becoming increasingly rare, even in the CAR, which is experiencing a process that France’s other former possessions in Africa went through ten years before. However, through a perverse effect rarely taken into consideration, the very fact that the French official avoided getting his hands dirty in the day-to-day management of the government, in Bangui or elsewhere, created a vacuum filled by other French individuals, who often claimed to have a secret mandate from the French authorities, especially the Élysée.

From the African point of view, when in doubt, better a French citizen who might be well-connected in Paris than a real foreigner, a simple undistinguished expatriate manager. That is why one finds many French nationals involved in the presidential palace security, customs and intelligence services. They have no official mandate from Paris, but form part of the French operation, especially in the eyes of the local population and other foreign nationals.

This ambiguity was strengthened by the persistent uncertainties about France’s “new African policy”. The authorities in Paris have been proclaiming their new policy since the second half of the 1990s but it has remained ill-defined, except for an administrative reform in 1998 (integration of the ministry of cooperation into the Quai d’Orsay) and the adoption of a vague watchword: “neither interference, nor indifference”. The newly elected President Sarkozy’s previous lack of involvement in Africa revived speculation about the speed at which France intended to get out of Africa. At least in Bangui, and during autumn 2007, the reply to this question was far from being clear. While it was felt that Sarkozy intended to question the presence of French forces stationed in Africa, the new tenant at the

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group interview, UNDP employee, Bangui, July 2007.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interview, Bangui, July 2007.

¹⁰³ These figures were quoted by the ambassador of France in Bangui, Alain Girma, in a speech on 14 July 2007.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview, defence attaché at the French Embassy, Bangui, July 2007.

Élysée confirmed French support for Operation Boali and the continued presence of French soldiers on the front line in the CAR.

At the end of May 2007, a “full” colonel in place of a lieutenant-colonel, was appointed commander of Operation Boali, which was extended in June 2007. At the same time very pessimistic opinions were put forward on the subject of the CAR at the Élysée, and it seemed the Élysée was even resigned to failure.¹⁰⁵ In the last resort, as in the time of Jacques Chirac, the duty of humanitarian intervention was invoked to explain France’s involvement. Meanwhile, in Bangui, French officials were also on the defensive, if not disconcerted by what they understood to be the line followed by Paris. A diplomat remarked that the CAR was the soft belly of Africa and that return tickets would prove to be infinitely more expensive than remaining to prevent the total collapse of the state.¹⁰⁶ His military colleague complained about the absence of longer-term perspectives: “We have no final goal. We don’t know why we are here: we are here just for the sake of it. There is no strategic vision”.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Some quotes to illustrate the situation: “We will not see the sun rise in Bangui”; “They have an extremely selective vision about the finances”; “With the exception of the forestry sector, everything down there is a sinecure or private company”; “Bozizé signs the cheques himself, once a week, but the signature depends on the family’s advice, which precedes the council of ministers”; “We provide aid now that we have no desire to actually be there”; “The CAR is in a permanent post-conflict situation, it is like a punctured tyre that can no longer be repaired with patches”; “The CAR is the heart of pathetic Africa”; “We are no longer tied down other than by ourselves: it is the white man’s burden”. Crisis Group interviews, Bangui, July 2007.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interview, French diplomat, Bangui, July 2007.

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group interview, French military cooperation officer, Bangui, July 2007.

V. PERMANENT REBELLION

The double message of the elections of May 2005 had not been understood: legitimised at the ballot box, General Bozizé’s regime no longer felt constrained to conduct a “consensual co-management” of the country, which was anyway limited to co-opting individuals whose powers were more theoretical than real. Meanwhile, with rare exceptions, the opposition did not take into account popular aspirations for peace. Only a few weeks after the elections had confirmed François Bozizé as head of state, in a poll in which his predecessor in power was banned from participating, a first site of rebellion emerged in the north west, the stronghold of former President Ange-Félix Patassé.

Six months later, in spring 2006, a second insurrection, this time in the extreme north east of the country, increased the insecurity in northern CAR where, after the (unpaid) civil administration had fled, the local FACA forces became the only government representatives. The soldiers then conducted indiscriminate reprisals against the population and such wide-ranging atrocities –especially in the north west, where belonging to a particular ethnic group was taken to indicate adherence to the rebellion – that it became difficult to know who was contributing most to the collapse of public order: rebel activity or the army’s policy of scorched earth.¹⁰⁸

A. THE INSURRECTIONS IN THE NORTH WEST

The rebellion in the north west began as an attempt to gain revenge by the former holders of power, who encouraged their ethnic groups to rebel in the hope of regaining power in Bangui. The situation in the north east was different for several reasons: first, the distant province of Vakaga is very sparsely populated (0.8 inhabitants per sq. km); second, the armed struggle here was the work of dissidents of the new regime, who took up arms after being pushed out after General Bozizé came to power or soon after; finally, the fallout from the conflict in neighbouring Darfur (and the hand of Khartoum) complicated even further the existing Chad-

¹⁰⁸ “State of anarchy: Rebellion and abuses against civilians”, Human Rights Watch (HRW), 14 September 2007, executive summary. According to HRW: “Since mid-2005, hundreds of civilians have been killed, more than 10,000 houses burned, and approximately 212,000 persons have fled their homes in terror to live in desperate conditions deep in the bush”. The report says that “the vast majority of summary executions and unlawful killings, and almost all village burnings have been carried out by government forces, often in reprisal for rebel attacks”.

CAR situation. We will examine in the next section to what precise extent the interference of the Sudanese authorities sparked off, maintained or amplified the troubles in north east CAR. However, all armed opposition in the CAR has been driven by its desire to acquire control of the state to advance its own personal interests rather than any specific political agenda.

They are the corollary of a vicious circle, composed of the following stages: people respond to poor governance by taking up arms; the rebels take power; distribution of the faded finery of the state then creates malcontents, who join the previous holders of power in taking up arms to recover their sinecures. Then, either the new rebels win the day and the circle is completed or the government in position, under the pressure of the international community, which urges it to negotiate and rally support from the armed opposition, invites the rebel leaders into the government and their combatants (often members of the same ethnic group) into an army that becomes less and less national. The consequence of all this is the corruption of state institutions, whose lack of legitimacy then justifies further rebellions. In addition, given the impossibility of a peaceful transfer of power, the legal opposition loses its *raison d'être*. Finally, the international community loses its credibility by demanding incorporation of the malcontents at the same time as supporting the fight against impunity, which, if it were to be taken seriously, would prevent the recognition of any government that comes to power by the force of arms.¹⁰⁹

“The rulers of today are the rebels of yesterday”.¹¹⁰ By virtue of this principle, which makes rebellion the antechamber of power, the dignitaries of Patassé’s former government invested in their future by stirring up a rebellion in their stronghold. This was not difficult, given the new government’s distrust of the members of their ethnic group, even less so when the army and the Presidential Guard carried out indiscriminate violence against the civilian population, whose crime, in their eyes, was to belong to the wrong ethnic group. It is due to these dynamics that the current government invented and maintains permanent rebellion in the CAR. “Bozizé has gained a following, all rebellions from now on are only out for a share of the spoils”, observed a French officer in Bangui.¹¹¹ “We use force to obtain something: power, if one has the resources to go all the way; and at least a good

position, if they are forced to negotiate to obtain your support”.¹¹²

In these circumstances, to be an active member of the legal opposition is akin to priesthood. The former prime minister, Martin Ziguélé, beaten in the second round of the presidential elections of 2005, is one of the few to have taken this road. Leader of the MPLC, the party founded by Ange-Félix Patassé that he is trying to reform, he encounters so many difficulties that, in his home region, he is seen as a traitor who has left his people powerless to resist the government atrocities he tries to combat by legal means.¹¹³ Meanwhile, the leading lights of the opposition – Abel Goumba, Charles Massi, Enoch Lakoué and one of General Kolingba’s sons – have abandoned opposition and focused on saving themselves by taking up the best available posts that the government is willing to give them.¹¹⁴ As for the 40 or so opposition parties, who often represent only their usually not very numerous members, they have been totally eclipsed by the political-military movements, who now capture almost all the political attention at their expense.

In the field, the previously diffuse level of insecurity in the north west took a more organised and systematic form with the banditry of the road-cutters in the second half of 2005. As well as being a reaction to Ange-Félix Patassé’s exclusion from the elections, this could also have been a consequence of the withdrawal of the Chad forces that had previously been stationed along the border with the CAR and that exercised a *de facto* right of pursuit into CAR territory.¹¹⁵ In the context of the increasing tension with Sudan, President Idriss Déby ordered the transfer of these units from the south to the east of Chad. While this was going on, a series of places to the south of the Chad-CAR border were attacked by insurgents between September and December 2005. At the beginning of 2006, rebel activity progressed to the interior of the CAR, until it reached the Kabo-Kaga

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Crisis Group interview, Martin Ziguélé, Bangui, July 2007. Born in Paoua in 1956, Martin Ziguélé belongs to an ethnic minority of the centre west, the Karé. He is trying to organise the apparatus of the MPLC, the best structured CAR party. To this end, his slogan for the most recent ordinary congress, held 21-23 June 2007 in Bangui, was “depersonalisation”, which is aimed at former President Patassé and his supporters.

¹¹⁴ The individuals mentioned are, respectively, ombudsperson of the republic, minister, governor of the Central Bank and minister.

¹¹⁵ The decision taken in December 2005 by Cameroon, Chad and the CAR to grant each other the right of cross-border pursuit of rebels and road-cutters did not compensate for the withdrawal of the Chad units, which were well-accustomed to this task.

¹⁰⁹ For example, the UN Security Council encouraged “the government to continue its discussions with rebel groups” at the same time as it called on the authorities in Bangui to “fight impunity”, Security Council Press Statement on Central African Republic, SC/9069 AFR/1556, 3 July 2007.

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, leader of a Central African human rights organisation, Bangui, July 2007.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interview, Bangui, 10 July 2007.

Bandoro corridor. Bandoro is only 350km from Bangui. From then on, the two most populous CAR prefectures, Ouham and Ouham-Pendé, were beset by a level of insecurity that was all the more permanent because the government forces, FACA and especially the Presidential Guard, increased it tenfold because of their own atrocities.

“The FACA have no respect for life” said a Catholic priest who witnessed “several dozen” summary executions. “As far as they are concerned, the lives of people who do not belong to their own ethnic group are worth nothing”.¹¹⁶ “They have set the region alight”, said Martin Ziguélé. “The people live like animals, hiding in the forest. Those who commit crimes remain unpunished. Those who are removed from the army on one day are recruited by the Presidential Guard on the next”.¹¹⁷ According to the UNHCR, more than 100,000 people have been displaced in the north west of the CAR. Many of them have just spent, as of summer 2007, their second year bivouacking in huts made of tree branches, well back from the main roads where they fear meeting armed men.¹¹⁸

Both sides seemed fixated on Paoua, the home town of former President Patassé. On 29 January 2006, rebels attacked the town and targeted three objectives: the police station, the police force and the military base. Loyalist forces retreated to the outskirts of Paoua, where they regrouped before counter-attacking and chasing the attackers, who dispersed into the forest. According to several witnesses, harsh reprisals were then inflicted on civilians by Lieutenant Eugène Ngaïkoïssé, a member of President Bozizé’s ethnic group and commander of the troops based at Bossangoa.¹¹⁹ On 7 February 2006, Amnesty International made serious charges against the army and denounced the violence in northern CAR. “Victims of human rights abuses by

government soldiers include human rights defenders and journalists who have been targeted because they have denounced the violence against civilians”, said the human rights organisation. “Soldiers have continued to torture and kill civilians, rape women and loot property with impunity. The main perpetrators are reported to be members of the Presidential Guard who are directly responsible to President Bozizé as the commander-in-chief of the armed forces and Minister of Defence”.¹²⁰

These were not isolated incidents. According to a report by the Diocesan Justice and Peace Commission of Kaga Bandoro, “more than 2,500 homes were burned down” by loyalist forces in this area alone between August 2006 and March 2007. To illustrate the level of government terror, this document contains an appendix with photos of “two young people killed by FACA soldiers in the centre of Bandoro”, showing two soldiers in civilian clothing, without any distinctive military insignia, standing triumphant over their victims on the ground, one of them with his foot on the head of one of the dead, as though it was a hunting trophy.¹²¹ An international researcher who is familiar with the area told us: “People in the north west told us they feared the rebels but feared the government soldiers even more”. He added: “There are few international protests considering the extent of the atrocities committed. Humanitarians do not protest a lot because they are afraid they will no longer be able to work”.¹²² In many conversations with UN officials and diplomats in Bangui, the argument that the president was “democratically elected” is used to downplay the known abuses committed by the regime.

The rebellion in the north west of the CAR, which includes the village self-defence committees and the *zaraguinas* who have rallied to the cause, is reinforced by members of Ange-Félix Patassé’s former Presidential Guard. They are joined together in the Army for the Restoration of the Republic and Democracy (APRD), which is led by Lieutenant Florian Ndjadder, son of the

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, Bangui, July 2007.

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Bangui, July 2007. Despite the impunity, international pressure is not always in vain. Captain Ngaïkossé, nicknamed the “butcher of Paoua” was withdrawn from the region in March 2007 and sent abroad for training. Major Kada succeeded him as the “eye of Bangui” and second lieutenant Ngaïkito as his assistant. He is a Gbaya who is in direct contact with the presidency. Crisis Group interview, international humanitarian researcher, Bangui, 18 July 2007.

¹¹⁸ “Fact Sheet”, UNHCR, op. cit. On the dramatic condition of civilian refugees in the bush, in July 2007, Crisis Group gathered many corroborating witness statements from humanitarians working in the north west of the CAR. The danger on the roads in this region is also indicated by many violent incidents and hostage taking involving members of charitable organisations. For example, the most tragic was the death of Elsa Serfass, 27, a French volunteer working with Médecins sans Frontières, killed by an APDR commando near Paoua, on 11 June 2007.

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Bangui, July 2007.

¹²⁰ “Amnesty dénonce des exactions en Centrafrique”, Agence France-Presse, 7 February 2006. See also “Government tramples on the basic rights of detainees”, Amnesty International, 30 November 2006.

¹²¹ “Rapport circonstancié sur les événements de Kaga-Bandoro, Période : août 2006-mars 2007”, The Diocesan Justice and Peace Commission, March 2007.

¹²² Crisis Group interview, Bangui, July 2007. In this context, one can question the lack of proportion that characterised the French decision to halt all training of members of the Presidential Guard in France, after a fight between President Bozizé’s bodyguards and gendarmes at the residence of the French ambassador, on 14 July 2007. Many summary executions of CAR civilians, perfectly well documented and known to the French authorities, had not provoked such a firm reaction.

deceased leader of the former head of state's Presidential Guard.¹²³ Ndjadder lives in Bamako, the capital of Mali. On the ground, it was two local officers, Laurent Djimweï and Maradass Lakoué, who command the fluctuating number of troops, estimated at a few hundred men by the French military, who also claim the rebels' arms are basic, consisting of a few automatic weapons (AK-47s), traditional hunting rifles (calibre 12), and bows and arrows.¹²⁴

Laurent Djimweï, who presents himself as a spokesperson for the APRD, began negotiations with the central government in spring 2007 by requesting, among other things, a case of whisky. Maradass Lakoué, whose men operate especially in the area around Paoua, only began talks with the Bangui authorities on 10 December 2007 and only to affirm that he placed himself under the authority of Laurent Djimweï and refused separate negotiations.¹²⁵ Both of them see themselves more as resistance fighters, anxious to protect their ethnic group, rather than rebels with precise political demands. The former President Patassé's influence on them and their combatants, among whom there are many child soldiers, is difficult to evaluate. Although there is no doubt that the former head of state and several close associates communicate regularly with the insurgents, it does not seem that they support the combatants materially, at least not in any significant way.¹²⁶

Other movements recruit among the down at heel in the region and even more so among the many displaced people urgently looking for a means of support and from the road-cutters in both Central Africa and Chad. An organisation led by Steve Guéret, the Patriotic Movement for the Restoration of the Central African Republic (MPRC) claimed responsibility for the murder of the

mayor of Bossangoa.¹²⁷ Finally, "Colonel" Abdoulaye Miskine (whose real name is Martin Koumtamadji), the former head of a special unit given responsibility for securing the north by President Patassé, claims to lead the Democratic Front for the Central African People (FDPC). After an unsuccessful rebel attack on Paoua, 14-15 January 2007, Abdoulaye Miskine joined the government in Bangui.

On 2 February, in the presence of Colonel Qaddafi, he and General Bozizé signed the Syrte Accords,¹²⁸ before returning to the CAR capital in the presidential plane. However, after three weeks spent inside the presidential palace – for fear of being taken to task in the streets of Bangui – Abdoulaye Miskine went back to Libya. He complained to Colonel Qaddafi, guarantor of the accords, that the government had not fulfilled its commitments. According to a source close to President Bozizé, the three protagonists met again in Libya but the meeting did not go well for the former rebel, because most of his complaints related to his own personal comfort.¹²⁹ Nevertheless on 13 July 2007 the CAR presidency announced the appointment of Abdoulaye Miskine as an adviser to the chief of state, even though he had been indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for atrocities committed in 2002 and 2003 in the north of the CAR.¹³⁰

Finally, on 8 August, from Tripoli and on the airwaves of Radio France Internationale (RFI), Abdoulaye Miskine declined his new post as presidential adviser in Bangui, invoking "non-respect of several clauses of the Syrte Accords". Through the same channel, the CAR presidency argued that Abdoulaye Miskine should come back to CAR and identify his troops if he wanted them to be integrated as combatants into the national army. "Colonel" Miskine's representativity in the field is questionable.¹³¹ Be that as it may, the game he played with the government could not hide the essential. A

¹²³ Florian Ndjadder succeeded Lieutenant Larmassoum ("Larma"), as head of the APDR. Larmassoum was another member of the former Presidential Guard, who had been arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment by the Bangui courts on 18 August 2006. His father, François Bedaya Ndjadder, a former prefect and commander of the Presidential Guard, had been promoted to general by Ange-Félix Patassé in the middle of a press conference in May 1996, for "services rendered" in the defence of the government against mutinies.

¹²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, French military personnel, Bangui, July 2007.

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interview, one of the intermediaries between the government and rebels, Bangui, July 2007.

¹²⁶ Among the "telephonic godfathers" of the resistance fighters in the north east, in addition to the former President Patassé and his spokesperson, Prosper Ndouba (both exiled in Togo), are the former minister of defence under the deposed regime, Jean-Jacques Demafouth, who lives in Paris. According to CAR rebels visiting Paris in May and June 2007, Demafouth tries to coordinate rebel activities in the north west and north east.

¹²⁷ "Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in the Central African Republic and the activities of the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office in the Central African Republic", UNSC S/2006/441, 27 June 2006, p. 5.

¹²⁸ The Syrte Accords stipulated an immediate halt to hostilities, the cantonment of rebel forces while awaiting integration into the national army, the reinstatement of civil servants and the "reintegration of people displaced by the conflict". APDR insurgents were given a general amnesty.

¹²⁹ Crisis Group interview, adviser of President Bozizé, Bangui, July 2007.

¹³⁰ Cf. "La CPI ouvre une enquête sur des viols en masse en République centrafricaine", IRIN, 22 May 2007 ; and "Central African Republic : ICC Opens Investigation", Human Rights Watch communiqué, 22 May 2007.

¹³¹ Crisis Group interviews, French military personnel, Bangui, July 2007.

return to peace in north west CAR depended on two conditions being met: political negotiations with Ange-Félix Patassé and his supporters, and an end to the escalating violence in the deposed president's home region. Fundamentally, it was the responsibility of the government in Bangui to take the initiative in order to achieve this second condition.

B. THE "DARFURISATION" OF THE NORTH EAST

The prefecture of Vakaga, in the extreme north east of the CAR "is another world".¹³² It is a world where Sango, the national language, is hardly spoken and where Muslims are in the majority. It is an arid savannah that has always looked more towards Abéché, in Chad, and Nyala, the capital of South Darfur, the two spiritual centres and seats of power to which local chiefs have traditionally given their allegiance. Bangui, which is about 1000km away, is inaccessible by road for half the year, during the rainy season, which lasts for six months and cuts this area off from the rest of the country. There is not a single tarmac road that is usable all year round. Moreover, there are no tarmac roads in Vakaga and hardly any health infrastructure or schools. The administration is reduced to its most simple expression. Civil servants have not been paid for such a long time that they are unable to calculate how much they are owed. They work when they are able to spare the time for a "public service" that no longer provides a way to earn a living.

The CAR shares a 1200km border with Sudan. There are only two border posts, at Bambouti and Am-Dafok, which are 700km apart from each other as the crow flies. This demarcation of sovereignty is then a mirage, or is felt to be one by the people who live in the area. Nomadic routes cross it blithely, nomads migrate with their livestock, in search of pasture as the seasons dictate. Sometimes, sovereign states themselves treat their borders with disdain, without any subversive intent, for very practical reasons. For example, Sudan built a road on the Congo-Nile interfluvium, between Yubu and Ezo, which encroaches on the CAR side.¹³³ With all the more reason, the borders are crossed without hesitation in times of war. This was especially the case between 1983 and 2005 during the second civil war between the north and south of Sudan. In the 1980s, thousands of rebels from the south crossed through

Vakaga to attack Khartoum's army from the rear.¹³⁴ In the 1990s, the Sudanese army did the same to attack the SPLA in the west of Bahr el-Ghazal.¹³⁵ More recently, in 2006, members of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) were spotted there, meeting representatives of Khartoum, probably to explore the scope for a retreat and to pick up arms supplies.¹³⁶

1. Militarisation of the discontent

"It is essential to understand that the 'Darfurisation' of Vakaga is a fact, whether there is, or whether there isn't interference from Khartoum".¹³⁷ In fact, the coexistence of these communities – between Sudanese and Central Africans; between different ethnic groups; and, in particular, between sedentary peasants and nomadic pastoralists – increasingly poses problems in the context of a failed state, precarious resources, less abundant rainfall and mounting demographic pressures. The environmental conditions that underlie the crisis in Darfur are also present in Vakaga: isolated territory, political marginalisation, deterioration of the natural factors of production, crisis in livelihoods. There is therefore nothing surprising if conflict increases there as well. Tension reached a first climax on 8 May 2002, with the murder of an important spiritual chief, Yaya Ramadan, by Sudanese pastoralists. In retaliation, 63 Sudanese nomads were massacred in Birao on 17 May 2002.

However, at the end of a year full of murderous incidents, the Sudanese authorities managed to calm the people of Vakaga down by compensating them for the "harm" they had suffered. This program envisaged the building of a monument to the memory of Yaya Ramadan and the construction of a mosque, a school and a community hall. The agreement, which was reached in March 2003 at the same time as the change in government in Bangui, has never been put into practice on the CAR side, where money paid by Sudan was misappropriated by both the old and the new government. In Vakaga, this left a legacy of bitterness, all the more so as the Gula, the ethnic group of which Yaya Ramadan was one of the spiritual leaders, consider themselves to have been especially singled out for ostracism by central government. The Gula therefore swell the ranks of the rebellion and, as a result, the forces of order call the insurrection the Gula rebellion and

¹³² Crisis Group interview, Jean-Paul Ngoupandé, Paris, June 2007.

¹³³ Yves Boulvert, "Retour à Bangui quarante ans après. Le Centrafrique après une décennie de crise", presented at the Overseas Academy of Sciences (Académie des Sciences d'Outre-Mer), 7 January 2005, p. 14.

¹³⁴ Louisa Lombard, "Sudan Issue Brief: A widening war around Sudan. The proliferation of armed groups in the Central African Republic", Small Arms Survey, report no. 5, January 2007, p. 1.

¹³⁵ "Central African Republic: Enemy's Enemy", *Africa Confidential*, vol. 43, no. 7, 5 April 2002.

¹³⁶ Cf. Crisis Group Africa Report N°124, *Northern Uganda: Seizing the Opportunity for Peace*, 26 April 2007.

¹³⁷ Crisis Group interview, UN official, Bangui, July 2007.

mercilessly track them down – an example of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Against this backdrop, the arrival of former comrades-in-arms of General Bozizé, “liberators” who had been disappointed or excluded from power in Bangui, further contributed to the militarisation of the prevailing discontent. The story of one of them, Captain Abakar Sabone, illustrates the cycle of permanent rebellion.¹³⁸ In May 2001, as a security adviser for President Patassé, Abakar Sabone met General Bozizé and Jean-Jacques Demafouth, who at that time were, respectively, chief of staff of the army and minister of defence. What happened next is well known: the “coup too far” of 28 May 2001 resulted in the arrest of Demafouth and, in October, the flight of General Bozizé to Chad, which is where Captain Sabone rejoined him one year later, in November 2002. A Muslim from Vakaga, he broke with the Patassé regime because of the atrocities committed against Muslims by Abdoulaye Miskine and his southern Chad commandos – the “Codos” – in the north of Central Africa. General Bozizé had no troops. Captain Sabone was in a position to raise troops in his home region, among his ethnic group, the Rungas.

The general and the captain therefore made common cause. Abakar Sabone and about twenty of his men even acted as bodyguards to François Bozizé up until his victorious entry into Bangui, on 15 March 2003. It was at that point that the new head of state entrusted his personal security to a contingent of 80 Chad nationals, to provide some margin of manoeuvre with regard to the liberators who were looting Bangui and making the regime unpopular. Sabone looked on as minor Muslim rebel chiefs (Djida, Daze, Ramadan, Marabout etc.) supplanted him as representatives at the ministry of defence, which General Bozizé kept control of himself. Finally, on 17 April 2004, Bozizé distributed passes with the presidential stamp and 300,000 FCFA each (about €500) “without any affectation” to his former comrades-in-arms and asked them to leave “for three months, until things calmed down in Bangui”.

Not without difficulty, Captain Sabone and other military leaders of the rebellion, were put on a plane to N’Djamena, under the pretext of conducting a goodwill mission to President Idriss Déby. Five months later, the prodigal son of Vakaga was back home organising another military force. He also made contact with another opponent to the regime in exile, Jean-Jacques Demafouth, who was looking for someone with the capacity to act in the field.

In brief, Abakar Sabone was even more ready to carry out another operation to “change the regime in Bangui”.¹³⁹

At the beginning of 2006, another stratum was added to the geology of the conflict in the north of Central Africa. The strongest faction of the armed Chadian rebellion supported by Khartoum, Mahamat Nour’s United Front for Change (FUC), established itself in Vakaga with a view to striking a fatal blow against the regime in N’Djamena by short-circuiting the Al Fasher-Abéché axis where Idriss Déby – who himself came to power along this route in 1990 – massed his troops. At that time, the FUC was a federation of two main movements, led respectively by Djibrine Nour and Adoum Rakis, who used northern CAR as their rearguard for a lightning attack. This “blitz” on N’Djamena was launched in April 2006 and failed: the rebel column was defeated at the last minute, in the suburbs of the Chadian capital.¹⁴⁰

Two weeks later, on 25-26 April 2006, an Antonov aircraft, apparently from neighbouring Sudan, made two round trips to Tiroungoulou, in the centre south of Vakaga, where it unloaded military supplies, boxes of ammunition and about 50 armed men who disappeared into the surrounding area. The Sheikh of Tiroungoulou, a Gula, informed the CAR authorities of the arrival of more Chadian rebels. This loyalty was not well rewarded. Even though President Bozizé himself mentioned foreign invaders and aggressors¹⁴¹ in his speech to the nation on 26 June, the government forces sent to the area conducted reprisals against the local population who they supposed to be supporters of the rebels. To what extent the Chadian combatants supported by Khartoum later joined the insurgents of Vakaga, through opportunism or because they had been ordered to do so, is difficult to establish. Their participation in the armed operations that followed was noticed, though with little detail being given, in several witness statements that also mentioned the presence of Sudanese advisers.¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ According to Jean-Paul Ngoupandé, “many Central Africans” who joined the ranks of FUC were later taken prisoner by forces loyal to President Idriss Déby, Crisis Group interview, Paris, June 2007.

¹⁴¹ Cf. *Centrafrique Matin*, 27 June 2006.

¹⁴² The most explicit witness statement was given by a Central African civil servant taken prisoner by the UFDR in November 2006, who had crossed the path of two Sudanese military advisers in uniform in Ouadda, cf. “State of anarchy”, op. cit., p. 89. See also the statement by a rebel mentioned in “Sudan Issue Brief”, op. cit., p. 14.

¹³⁸ Crisis Group interview, two of Abakar Sabone’s former supporters, Paris, June 2007.

2. The paras take Birao

On 30 October 2006, the administrative centre of Vakaga, Birao, was attacked at dawn by about 50 combatants. They took the town after having rapidly put to flight about 60 government soldiers. The region's most important town with a population of 14,000 passed into the hands of the rebels, as well as a whole arsenal of arms, ammunition and nine vehicles, including two trucks mounted with 14.5mm machine-guns, abandoned by the FACA.¹⁴³ A spokesperson for the insurgents, Captain Yao,¹⁴⁴ claimed responsibility for the capture of Birao on behalf of the Union of Democratic Forces for Unity (UFDR). The rebel movement also took control of the towns of Ouanda Djallé and Sam Ouandja, even occupying briefly, on 27 November, Ndélé, the administrative centre of a neighbouring prefecture (Bamingi-Bangoran). The rebel thrust reached a third prefecture, that of Haute-Kotto in south east Vakaga.

Transported and supervised by the French army, the FACA launched a counter-offensive on 27 November 2006. The loyalist forces retook the two prefecture administrative centres, Ndélé and Birao, on the same day. Ouanda Djallé and Sam Ouandja were taken at the very beginning of December. In preparation for these operations, France reinforced its troops in the CAR with another 100 men. In a sign that it had little confidence of the independent capacity of FACA, the French army decided to locate an Operational Assistance Detachment (DAO) of eighteen men, including a doctor and two nurses, in Birao. The situation on the ground contrasted with the presentation of French intervention given by the minister of defence, Michèle Alliot-Marie in Paris, on 28 November: "We have defence agreements that quite naturally apply to Central Africa", she said at the end of a meeting of the Council of Ministers, adding that "these are operations that are being led by the CAR army. We have only been supporting them".¹⁴⁵

The official version was shown to be completely false by events when, on the night of Saturday/Sunday 3-4 March 2007, the UFDR rebels attacked Birao again. The alert was such high level that two Mirage F-1CR took off from N'Djamena, more than 900km away, to destroy a 30mm cannon, four pick-ups and a truck belonging to the insurgents. In the short term, this avoided the threat that

French DAO personnel might be captured, taken hostage or killed. However, the eighteen men surrounded in Birao were still in danger. So right in the middle of the French presidential election campaign, France mounted an urgent airborne operation, the first in Africa since the famous 1978 drop by French "paras" on Kolwezi. The Parisian press revelled in highlighting this parallel when it reported the events – two weeks later.¹⁴⁶

On the night of Sunday/Monday 4-5 March 2007, no news filtered out about the dropping of ten soldiers of the third Parachute Regiment of the Marine Infantry (3e RPIMa) in the zone with the task of contacting the isolated DAO. Then, on the night of Tuesday 6 March, during a High Altitude Low Opening (HALO) operation, 58 more paratroopers jumped from 4,000 metres above the Birao landing strip, obstructed by the rebels but left undefended. Once cleared, Transalls carrying a company of 3e RPIMa, about 130 men, were able to land on the laterite landing strip and go on the offensive. The outcome of the clashes, after Birao was retaken and the cleanup operation in the surrounding area completed was: no losses on the French side; six FACA dead and eighteen wounded; and an unknown number (probably about 30) rebels killed.

An unquestionable military success, the recovery of Birao led to a media defeat for the French army. On 21 March, the humanitarian coordinator of the UN in Bangui, Toby Lanzer, led a delegation to Birao. His account, which compared Birao to Grozny, the martyred Chechen capital, brought to the attention of the world that "70 per cent of the homes" in the town retaken by the French soldiers had been burned down by the FACA and that only 600 of the 14,000 inhabitants had returned there two weeks after the establishment of a *pax gallica*.¹⁴⁷ In Paris, the newspapers finally got hold of the story that had been hidden from them. *Survie*, an association that fights against what it calls neo-colonial crime in "French Africa", criticised the French military for looking on without doing anything to stop reprisals by the FACA.¹⁴⁸

A CAR rebel leader in Paris, Christophe Gozam Betty, former ambassador to China under Patassé, went further. He accused the French army of having itself committed war crimes (the indiscriminate bombardment of villages near Birao) "punishable by the International Criminal Court".¹⁴⁹ The general tone of the French media expressed unease at witnessing the reappearance of the spectre of tropical interventionism, a phenomenon they hoped had

¹⁴³ For these details, and a continuation of the story, see the account of the operation published by the French monthly *Assaut*, July 2007, pp. 10-13.

¹⁴⁴ His real name was Diego Albator Yao. He was killed in the bush "during a dispute over booty", in March, according to a French military source, Crisis Group interview, Bangui, July 2007.

¹⁴⁵ "La France appuie l'armée centrafricaine contre les rebelles", Associated Press, 28 November 2007.

¹⁴⁶ The first article about the operation appeared in *Libération*, 23 March 2007.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. IRIN, 22 March 2007.

¹⁴⁸ "L'armée française accusée de 'crimes de guerre' en Centrafrique", PANA, 20 April 2007.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

been consigned to the history books. However, the proximity of Darfur, where some sectors of public opinion were demanding a military-humanitarian intervention, blunted the criticism.

3. A fragile ceasefire

The press hardly gave any details about the CAR rebel movement that had suddenly emerged on the margins of the French presidential campaign. The UFDR is a coalition of three armed groups that united under this name in September 2006, in Rwanda.¹⁵⁰ These three groups are: the Movement of Central African Liberators for Justice (MLJC) led by Captain Abakar Sabone, the Patriotic Action Group for the Liberation of Central Africa (GAPLC) led by Michel Djotodia and finally the Central African Democratic Front (FDC) led by Major Hassan Justin. The latter had belonged to Ange-Félix Patassé's Presidential Guard. The other two leaders, Abakar Sabone and Michel Djotodia, respectively spokesperson and president of the UFDR, have been in prison in Cotonou, in Benin, since 25 November 2006, after an arrest warrant was issued in Bangui. In their absence, operational command reverted to General Damane Zacharia, previously a municipal councillor in Gordil, in south west Vakaga, and former member of patrols between the CAR and Sudan.¹⁵¹

Damane Zacharia realised the consequences of the French return to Birao, where 150 marines were now on guard. On 13 April 2007, he signed a peace agreement with General Bozizé. The agreement, which was signed on behalf of the government by General Paul Raymond Ndougou, prefect of Ouham-Pendé and former prefect of Vakaga, was identical to the Syrte Accords signed two

months previously by Abdoulaye Miskine (with one slight difference: the godfather of the Syrte Accords was Colonel Qaddafi, the godfather of the Birao agreement was Omar Bongo). The UFDR was called on to participate in the management of state affairs. For the time being, a suitcase containing 50,000 FCFA (about €75 for each combatant) changed hands.¹⁵² Damane Zacharia stayed with his men to ensure the equitable distribution of funds. This was all the more recommendable as his absence might have encouraged dissidents. From his cell in Cotonou, Abakar Sabone disavowed what, in his eyes, was no more than a ceasefire agreement.

The UFDR spokesperson demanded his release and that of his imprisoned colleague, Michel Djotodia, as a precondition for peace negotiations.¹⁵³ The government in Bangui put out feelers. However, when it transpired that the imprisoned UFDR leaders refused to sign the Birao Accords and intended to go to Khartoum before taking a decision in this respect, President Bozizé asked Benin to "keep them in the cooler".¹⁵⁴ While waiting and as set out in the accords, a monitoring committee created to supervise the follow-up to the agreement reached with Damane Zacharia was supposed to make the move to peace in the north of the CAR irreversible.¹⁵⁵

To stand a chance of achieving this objective, President Bozizé knew he had to make peace with Khartoum. It was a high-risk undertaking, in which the CAR head of state had a lot to lose, starting with his organic alliance with Chad. At the beginning of December 2006, after Birao was retaken for the first time, he already wanted to visit Khartoum. However, at the last minute, while the aircraft obligingly sent by President Omar al-Bashir waited for him on the runway at Bangui airport, he had to abandon the trip after President Déby threatened to withdraw his bodyguard and the Chad contingent in the Multinational Force in Central Africa (FOMUC). France had also sent a message along these lines.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁰ According to explanations given by Bakar Sabone at a "press conference" in his cell in Cotonou and reported at icicemac.com in an article dated 4 November 2006, "Bilan meurtrier, Birao (République centrafricaine)", the UFDR's sanctuary was demarcated by the localities of Tiroungoulou, Gordil, Mélé and Boromota, in the heart of Gula country, where the many caves served as natural hiding places. The UFDR's armaments were significantly more modern and numerous than those of the APRD in the north west. Even if the FACA captured only a part of this military equipment, it would seem to indicate that the rebel movement enjoyed the support of one or more foreign donors.

¹⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, serving defence attaché, Bangui, July 2007. On the military front, Faki Ahmet ("Colonel Marabout") was another central figure in the UFDR. Of Chadian stock, he was a former lieutenant of Idriss Miskine, with whom he broke off relations after the atrocities committed by Muslims in the north of Central Africa. According to one Central African opposition figure in exile, Faki Ahmed looked after "the Khartoum connection", where he spent "the greater part of his time". Crisis Group interview, Paris, June 2007.

¹⁵² Crisis Group interview, adviser of President Bozizé, Bangui, July 2007.

¹⁵³ Cf. interview with Captain Sabone in *Afrique Education*, no. 228, 16-31 May 2007: "We are all completely in favour of a process of genuine national reconciliation, which must involve a national dialogue that includes all the living forces of the Central African nation. General Bozizé is not unaware that our release is an essential step towards this dialogue".

¹⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, President Bozizé, Bangui, July 2007.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. In July 2007, at the same as Abdoulaye Miskine, Damane Zacharia was appointed an adviser to the presidency by General Bozizé. Unlike the FDPC leader, the UFDR leader did not refuse this appointment.

¹⁵⁶ On instructions from Paris, the French ambassador made urgent contact with President Bozizé to let him know of

Taking advantage of the first signs of détente between N'Djamena and Khartoum, General Bozizé finally made the journey to Khartoum, on 29 August 2007. After an eight-month delay, he reached a separate peace agreement with Sudan, which, as it had been saying for months “had no plan to destabilise the CAR, which is of secondary importance compared to Chad, of which it is an ally”.¹⁵⁷ Despite this alliance, General Bozizé agreed to reopen the border with Sudan, closed in April 2006, as a sign of solidarity with N'Djamena, after the raid on the Chad capital by Khartoum-backed rebels. He also accepted the creation of mixed patrols along the Sudan-CAR border, a proposal made by Khartoum some time ago.¹⁵⁸

If this decision had really been implemented, the need to deploy an international peacekeeping force in Vakaga would have been ipso facto not as necessary, even though north east CAR remained the southern linchpin for all military and humanitarian efforts seeking to make the eastern border of Darfur “watertight” and avoid regional “contamination”. “[François] Bozizé has made [Omar] al Bashir happy. In the fields, there will be no more mixed patrols than in the past”, commented a senior Western official.¹⁵⁹

President Bozizé had to make a choice between two timetables that were in conflict with each other: his own agenda focusing on stabilising his own regime and restoring peace to the north east; and the international community's agenda, which was independent of his wishes, and was trying to contain and, if possible resolve the crisis in Darfur. The CAR head of state had hoped for the deployment of a UN force in Vakaga, which he hoped would have “beneficial consequences for the region's stricken economy”.¹⁶⁰ However, he despaired at seeing the arrival of the blue-helmets. “The UN's message is not clear, there is nothing very welcoming”, he said in mid-July.¹⁶¹

Conscious of the fact that the crisis in the north east was essentially a domestic problem, and only secondarily a

problem imported from Darfur, General Bozizé prioritised his plan for national reconciliation, and sought a commitment from the European Union, in the first place, and also France, rather than the UN. He also hoped to be able to use the opportunity presented to him by the Darfur conflict to further “political dialogue” with “moderate elements” of the armed opposition. However, the question was whether “the bigger crisis” in the neighbouring country, which mobilised the international community, would really have beneficial effects for the almost permanent and much less attractive torment in the CAR.

C. THE CONDITIONS REQUIRED FOR STABILISATION

Unless it was invisible, the hand of Khartoum did not weigh sufficiently heavily on north east CAR for it to be blamed for the problems in Vakaga. There was certainly interference. However, two return trips to Tiroungoulou by an Antonov, the training of some UDFR combatants by Sudan and the presence of Sudanese military advisers in the north east bush are not enough to prove an attempt at destabilisation. “If Khartoum wanted to destabilise the CAR, it would have done so long ago”, said an officer involved in Operation Boali. He added that “it would need only 500 men to take Bangui”.¹⁶² An American diplomat in Bangui gave a more qualified opinion. He said it was “impossible” to determine whether Khartoum had any responsibility for the turmoil in Vakaga.¹⁶³

A UN civilian official summarised the situation when he said: “The UDFR is a ‘made at home’ problem, but benefits from foreign support. The two aspects of the problem are connected but different”.¹⁶⁴ Meanwhile, faced with a choice of explaining the drift in the CAR with reference to Darfur or the internal dynamics of the crisis, a diplomat at the French presidency cynically and

Paris's veto. Crisis Group interviews, Elysée diplomat, Paris, June 2007 and President Bozizé, Bangui, July 2007.

¹⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview with President Bozizé, July 2007. For an account of the Central African president's two-day visit to Khartoum, see “Bozizé wants to end rebel war”, Reuters, 30 August 2007.

¹⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview with the Sudanese ambassador, Bangui, July 2007.

¹⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, Washington DC, September 2007.

¹⁶⁰ Crisis Group interview, President Bozizé, Bangui, July 2007. When John Homes, the assistant to the UN Secretary General for humanitarian affairs visited Bangui, on 4 April 2007, the CAR president strongly reiterated his wish to see “blue-helmets” deployed in Vakaga.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Crisis Group interview, Bangui, July 2007.

¹⁶³ Crisis Group interview, Bangui, July 2007. Here are his exact words: “What out of the disruptive activities in the north east originates in Khartoum – this is impossible to say”.

¹⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, Bangui, July 2007. One could also quote the following passage from the UN Secretary General's report to the Security Council, S/2007/97, on 23 February 2007, after a mission had been sent to the area: “During its brief visit, the assessment mission did not see compelling evidence that the situation in the Vakaga prefecture is directly related to the crisis in Darfur. However, mindful of the events of October to December 2006, when a number of towns in the Vakaga prefecture were occupied by rebel groups that had allegedly received external support, the assessment mission took note of the Government's view that the two situations are linked. It also noted the Government's call for the United Nations deployment to address the possible impact of the Darfur crisis on the Central African Republic”.

skillfully avoided the question: "It is the absence of internal dynamics that is the origin of the crisis".¹⁶⁵

Paradoxically, there is unanimity that the catastrophe that has struck its neighbour Darfur has created an opportunity for the CAR. "The crisis in Darfur is a great opportunity for the CAR", explained the former prime minister Jean-Paul Ngoupandé, currently special adviser to President Bozizé. "It gives us an unexpected lever at a time when the country is at its lowest point".¹⁶⁶ The representative of a Western country in Bangui agreed wholeheartedly with this assessment: "Darfur is a focus of interest that could attract more attention, and therefore aid, to the CAR".¹⁶⁷ The situation has already had a practical effect on humanitarian funds: in 2006, the CAR received more aid funds than in the three preceding years, 2003-2005; and during the first half of 2007, more funds were received than in the whole of 2006.¹⁶⁸ "The country is no longer forgotten" noted Toby Lanzer, the UN humanitarian coordinator.¹⁶⁹

Meanwhile, the World Food Programme (WFP) quintupled its budget in one year¹⁷⁰ to fund a Protracted Relief Operation (PRO) rather than an emergency aid operation. International aid is targeted at victims of internal crises in the CAR, especially in the north. The humanitarian impact of Darfur had previously been minimal given the massive needs of the CAR. Moreover, there were only 4,244 Sudanese refugees and asylum seekers on CAR soil in August 2007, while the number of CAR refugees (80,000 in total, of which 50,000 in Chad) and people displaced from their homes in the interior of the CAR (212,000) made the total of people affected close to 300,000.¹⁷¹ In desperation, 3,000 Central Africans even sought refuge in Darfur – as many, if not more, than the

number of Darfurians coming to the CAR. In fact, a good third of the Sudanese in the CAR, often originally from the south of their country, had lived there for years, especially in Mboki, in the south east, and Bangui.

On the economic front, Central Africa also took advantage of donors' greater understanding of its situation. Donors became more aware of the danger of a domino effect in the region. "We received political instructions from [George] Bush, [Jacques] Chirac and [Tony] Blair to reach an agreement with the CAR", said a World Bank official. "It came directly to [Paul] Wolfowitz [former president of the World Bank]. The CAR received preferential treatment that it did not deserve, in comparison to other countries, if the criteria of governance were to be used".¹⁷² This does not take away anything, much to the contrary, from the surprising performance of the CAR economy, which experienced a 3.8 per cent growth rate in 2006 and even 4.7 per cent in the first half of 2007.

The fact is that by the end of 2006, the CAR had received significantly more foreign financial aid than in the previous year, by about 73 billion FCFA (about €10 million). Most of this amount was to pay for servicing of the foreign debt, as President Bozizé did not fail to point out. "We never received the whiff of oxygen that we needed to revive the country, a critical amount of money that would allow us to make a decisive step towards the recovery of the country, that is, an aid injection of around €50 million".¹⁷³ However, the agreement with the Club of Paris to restructure the CAR foreign debts, reached on 20 April 2007, opened up this prospect¹⁷⁴ and on 26 October 2007, the CAR's donors committed themselves to such a step: meeting in Brussels, they promised aid totalling nearly \$600 million.

On the military front, the conflict in Darfur has indirectly benefited the CAR, as an example of what could happen: the activities of the janjaweed militias and

¹⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, Paris, June 2007.

¹⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, Paris, June 2007.

¹⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, Bangui, July 2007.

¹⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, Toby Lanzer, Bangui, July 2007.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. The greater attention paid by the international community to the CAR is, without doubt, not only due to the increased awareness of the dangers of the Darfur crisis spilling over into the CAR. Since 2006, after Toby Lanzer's arrival in Bangui, UN humanitarian action in the CAR has also undergone significant change: whereas the UN had 400 staff in the CAR in the summer of 2006, including four outside Bangui, it had 600 staff one year later, with one third stationed in the interior of the country.

¹⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, WFP official, Bangui, July 2007.

¹⁷¹ Cf., "Fact Sheet", UNHCR, op. cit. In May-June 2007, 2 650 refugees from Darfur poured into Sam Ouandja in the extreme north east of the CAR, 80km from the border with Sudan. They claimed to have walked for ten days from the town of Dafak, a distance of about 200km, to escape from armed attacks by combatants and bandits. Most of them (about 1500) were children, with the other thousand being equally divided between men and women.

¹⁷² Crisis Group interview, Washington DC, August 2007. The statistical data that follows is from the same source.

¹⁷³ Crisis Group interview, Bangui, July 2007.

¹⁷⁴ This agreement followed approval by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) of a Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility, and IMF and World Bank examination in March 2007 of a preliminary document on the enhanced initiative for Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC). The measures envisaged in the agreement, and based on the so-called Naples terms, should bring down the cost of servicing the debt owed to the creditors of the Club of Paris between 1 December 2006 and 30 November 2009 from \$36.1 million to zero – including arrears. The creditors of the Club of Paris also agreed in principle to increase debt relief for commercial debt to 90 per cent (Cologne Terms) as Central Africa had reached the "decision point" for the enhanced initiative for HIPC. The stock of debt owed to the creditors of the Club of Paris was estimated at \$68 million on 1 December 2006.

the mass murders committed by proxy by the Sudanese Leviathan seem like the kind of institutional perversion it was necessary to avoid in the CAR by rescuing the monopoly of legitimate violence of the forces of order. Starting with reorganisation of the FACA, this project, which was as old as French military co-operation with Bangui, was resumed with new energy. From now on, the focus was on reorganising the FACA. The European Union committed itself to providing the €7 million necessary to demobilise one sixth of FACA personnel – 800 soldiers out of almost 5,000 – who had passed retirement age, sometimes by a long way, but had not joined the reserves because payment of pensions was 33 months in arrears.¹⁷⁵

In addition to ordinary soldiers, these surplus elements included many non-commissioned officers and full officers, including 27 colonels and seven generals. The process was planned to be spread over one year to avoid destabilising the institution and will rejuvenate and revitalise the Central African army if, at the same time, the army introduces balanced recruitment and an impartial system of promotion. A first multi-ethnic intake, on the basis of an equal number of recruits from each of the country's military regions, took place in November 2006. Since then, the recruitment of officers through competitive examination, prepared by French military cooperation personnel, was ratified without change by the head of state and minister of defence.

However, the battle is far from being won. For the moment, only 1,200 to 1,500 of the CAR army's 5,000 personnel are really operational. The hard core of this force is the Protection and Security of Institutions Battalion (BPSI), the Presidential Guard's official name. On the other hand, the non-combat battalion, which includes aides-de-camp, sentries and other military personnel with service tasks, the amphibious battalion, theoretically responsible for security on the River Oubangui but without the resources for the task, and the fire-fighters' battalion are of no military value in the strict sense of the word. The few operational personnel, beginning with those in the Presidential Guard, are therefore constantly "sent to the interior of the country where they sometimes stay for long months, where there is no reception structure and where they are therefore, through force of circumstance, reduced to living off the country".¹⁷⁶

President Bozizé recognises that the General Food Bonus (PGA) is often not paid for months.¹⁷⁷ This is why a project has been started to build at least one barracks in each of the country's six military regions and permanently station battalions of four companies, that is, 500 to 600 men, at each one. This project was begun by both the European Union, which is paying for the construction of the barracks, at a cost of €1 million each, and FOMUC, which has an essential role in this scheme. The CEMAC peacekeeping force will be deployed in the new garrison towns "to deal with the initial problems before handing over control to the FACA after a period of several months".¹⁷⁸ This plan's goal is to make the CAR army into a territorial force, something it ceased to be twenty years ago. Twenty per cent of each barracks' needs will be met in this way. It will be necessary to appeal to bilateral donors to pay for the balance.

On 18 June 2007, the first of these barracks was transferred to the FACA, at Bria, in the centre of the country. Other such operations are programmed for Bozoum and Kaga Bandoro. FOMU forces have been stationed there to make the environment secure and develop the reception infrastructure, before being replaced by a unit of the CAR army. This military initiative was supposed to progress within the framework of the European "development poles" to be discussed after the meeting of CAR's donors, in October 2007.

Considering the intrinsic link between security and development, the provincial towns that are located at the heart of the current troubles, such as Paoua, Ndélé and Birao, could be chosen to act as a focus to revive the economy at the same time as restoring public order and, more generally, state structures. However, this strategy remains dependent on three conditions being fulfilled, which for the moment are not: the medium-term funding of FOMUC; political will by CEMAC to put its peacekeeping force on the front line and, finally, a broad consensus among donors.

In September 2007, the continuance of 380 FOMUC military personnel, the annual cost of which is €17 million,¹⁷⁹ was only ensured until the end of that year,

¹⁷⁵ For full details on reform of FACA: Crisis Group interviews, French military cooperation personnel, Bangui, July 2007.

¹⁷⁶ Crisis Group interview, French military cooperation officer, Bangui, July 2007.

¹⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, Bangui, July 2007.

¹⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, French military cooperation officer, Bangui, July 2007.

¹⁷⁹ Currently, contributions are as follows: the European Union, €7 million; France (bilaterally), €8 million; CEMAC, €2 million; and the CAR, €270,000. France also pays €8 million to cover the non-wage costs of Operation Boali, which was mounted, according to Paris, to support FOMUC. FOMUC has three contingents (Gabon, DRC, Chad) and, in principle, should have a Cameroon unit, which would allow it to have a reserve operational unit at its disposal. However, disagreement between the Gabonese president, Omar Bongo

even though the 8th European Development Fund had already promised to cover the costs in 2008. On the other hand, CEMAC heads of state have not reached a political consensus about either the exact role or the future composition of FOMUC, which lacks a fourth contingent. Moreover, the European “development poles” strategy was far from being accepted unanimously by donors. UN agencies also expressed reservations about what they described as “a seductive strategy on paper, but far too complicated and, in addition, lacking the necessary resources”.¹⁸⁰

Even on the military front, in the strictest sense of the word, there are still important problems to be resolved. In principle, the reorganisation of FACA should include the adoption of a manual containing all procedures. This work has been entrusted to French military cooperation personnel and (especially for the summary) to General Henri-Alain Guillou, an adviser in this field to the president and minister of defence. “However, if the Central Africans do not take on ownership of the idea of reorganisation, the armed forces’ manual risks once again being used only by whites”, warned one of his colleagues.¹⁸¹ And it is true that the government’s attitude to the reform is less than positive. Although the head of state supported the first recruitment process and the first set of promotions, he “still treats the Presidential Guard as if it were his personal militia”.¹⁸²

To preserve his margin for manoeuvre and shield his Presidential Guard from the exclusive influence of French cooperation personnel, General Bozizé reached a secret agreement with South Africa at the beginning of March 2007, in which the latter country was invited “to take the

Presidential Guard in hand”.¹⁸³ Pretoria accepted this task, pointing out its concern about stability in the north of neighbouring Congo-Kinshasa, where South Africa is very much involved as a regional power. However, in the first half of September 2007, discreet talks were held between Paris and Pretoria “to share the work and avoid being manipulated by Bozizé, who thought he would be able to play them off against each other”.¹⁸⁴ As an official visit to Paris drew near, which after several months of procrastination by the new French authorities, finally took place on 19 November 2007, the CAR president was put under strong pressure “to fulfil his part of the bargain in order to justify France’s involvement” in the CAR.¹⁸⁵

Nothing guaranteed that the impact of the Darfur crisis on Central Africa would remain as limited as it had been so far. From the humanitarian point of view, it was in fact improbable because the conflict in the west of Sudan, which had died out by force of circumstances after the scorched earth strategy implemented in the north and centre of Darfur, was tending to extend towards the south and interior of Sudan, especially in Kordofan. It became all the more urgent for the international community to clarify its intentions, which, so far, had not been short of contradictions. On 31 August 2006, UN Security Council Resolution 1706 had for the first time provided for a multi-dimensional presence (political, humanitarian, military and civilian) in the CAR, “if necessary” to prevent the violence in Darfur spilling over the border.¹⁸⁶

On 22 December 2006, when making an alternative proposal for a simple observation mission or an observation and protection of civilians operation, the UN Secretary-General envisaged the deployment of a battalion of blue helmets in Birao.¹⁸⁷ On 23 February 2007, Ban

and the Cameroon head of state, Paul Biya, about command of the peacekeeping force, has delayed this step. On the institutional front, there is also the question of knowing whether the peacekeeping operations in CAR come under CEMAC, that is, the economic and monetary organisation of the region’s francophone countries or the Central African Economic Community (CEAC), which includes ten countries, including Angola. While opinion was tending to be favourable towards CEAC, and therefore for the transformation of FOMUC into FOMAC, Rwanda’s withdrawal from CEAC on 18 June 2007 and Angola’s prioritisation of southern Africa and its regional organisation, SADEC, has sown doubts about CEAC’s capacity (an empty shell) to take over in the CAR. Crisis Group interview, FOMUC officer, Bangui, July 2007.

¹⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, manager of a UN specialised agency, Bangui, July 2007. Criticism of “the bad/poor behaviour” and “ineffectiveness” of FOMUC soldiers was also commented on by two other UN officials.

¹⁸¹ Crisis Group interview, French military co-operation officer, Bangui, July 2007.

¹⁸² Crisis Group interview, French military cooperation officer, Bangui, July 2007.

¹⁸³ Crisis Group interview, member of the Central African government Bangui, July 2007. According to this source, the South African president, Thabo Mbeki would himself make a discreet visit to Bangui to finalise an agreement involving the dispatch of about 30 South African instructors and the delivery of military equipment valued at \$60 million. In its edition of 13 September 2007, no. 524, p. 6, *La Lettre du Continent* also mentions a military assistance project, among other agricultural and mining projects, supposedly being negotiated between the CAR and Israel since mid-July 2007.

¹⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview, official responsible for France’s Africa policy, Paris, September 2007. These talks finally ended in concerted French-South African action locally by General Guillou and his counterpart from Pretoria, General Hoogaard.

¹⁸⁵ Crisis Group communication, official responsible for France’s Africa policy, Paris, November 2007. The previous dismissal of Colonel Ndoutingai from his post as minister of finance illustrates the pressure put on by Paris.

¹⁸⁶ Resolution 1706, UNSC S/RES/1706, 31 August 2006, para. 9 d.

¹⁸⁷ Here is the verbatim of this proposal: “It would seem necessary to consider establishing a separate United Nations

Ki-moon took a supplementary step by proposing to send 10,900 blue helmets to Chad and the CAR, without previous agreement with Sudan. This UN Mission to Chad and the Central African Republic (MINURCAT) planned to deploy about 300 soldiers of a peacekeeping force in the CAR, 200 support personnel and 50 to 80 civilian officials with special responsibility for protecting human rights.

While passing through Bangui, on 4 April 2007, the new assistant secretary-general for humanitarian affairs and the coordinator of UN emergency aid, John Holmes, publicly endorsed this plan, if it were needed, even without the approval of Chad.¹⁸⁸ UN resident humanitarian affairs coordinator in the CAR, Toby Lanzer, had then declared: "This is a place where the international community is welcomed. It is a country of four million people. We should be able to fix this".¹⁸⁹ However, the UN then stepped aside to make way for the European Union, which, in autumn 2007, made provision for the deployment of 3,200 soldiers, half of which were French, in Chad and the CAR.

From the CAR point of view, a European peacekeeping operation seemed to be the best possible response to a crisis that, even if the repercussions of Darfur were to gain momentum in the months to come, was primarily due to internal factors in the CAR. While providing the southern pivot of an international force to contain the conflict in the west of Sudan, the European peacekeeping force would be part of a more long-term strategy for the revival of the state, the rule of law and the economy throughout northern CAR, by means of the provincial development centres. In coordination with FOMUC, the European contingent could begin in the north east the work that had already been undertaken elsewhere by the African peacekeeping force, which, in turn, would finish the job

once the European operation was completed. It is only by sharing the tasks and providing the continuity that is indispensable when dealing with such immense problems as these that this combination of preventive measures, emergency operations and post-conflict support will have a chance of success.

From this perspective, the international community would dispose of a supplementary, and not negligible, means to encourage CAR actors, including both the government and the rebels, to break out of the vicious circle of a violent political culture. After the investigation it opened, on 22 May 2007, into the "war crimes" committed in 2002 and 2003, the ICC opened a permanent office in Bangui in September 2007. The ICC had already warned that it would continue "to pay attention to the current situation in the Central African Republic" where "there are worrying reports of violence and crimes being committed in the northern areas of the country bordering Chad and Sudan".¹⁹⁰

This announcement provoked contrasting responses in Bangui. The Central African Coalition of Human Rights Organisations welcomed it and declared: "We would like to take this opportunity to launch an appeal to the ICC Prosecutor to use his powers *proprio motu* to examine the situation that prevails in the north of the Central African Republic". Meanwhile, President Bozizé felt that the statement was "delicate" and explained: "Can you compare a poor country like ours to Switzerland? We have to keep things in perspective. We cannot waste time constantly explaining and justifying ourselves".¹⁹¹

presence for Chad and the Central African Republic, which would liaise and coordinate closely with the African Union Mission in the Sudan (AMIS)/UNMIS and other United Nations operations. Given the interdependence of the situation in the two countries, the presence should cover both Chad and the Central African Republic. The new United Nations presence would have its headquarters in N'Djamena. Major operational activities would be focused on eastern Chad and the north-eastern Central African Republic, with a liaison office in Bangui". "Report of the Secretary General on Chad and the Central African Republic, on implementation of paragraphes 9 d) and 13 of Security Council Resolution 1706 (2006)", S/2006/1019, 22 December 2006, para. 60.

¹⁸⁸ "Centrafrique: John Holmes propose l'envoi sans attendre d'une force de maintien de la paix", UN information service, 4 April 2007.

¹⁸⁹ This comment was mentioned by Lydia Polgreen in her article, "Wedged Amid African Crises, a Neglected Nation Suffers", *The New York Times*, 2 April 2007.

¹⁹⁰ "Prosecutor opens investigation in the Central African Republic", ICC communiqué, 22 May 2007, at www.icc-cpi.int/press/pressreleases/248.html.

¹⁹¹ Crisis Group interview, President Bozizé, Bangui, July 2007.

VI. CONCLUSION

In spring 2007, Thierry Bingaba, a former minister of economy and finance under General Kolingba, returned to Bangui for the first time since moving to Paris ten years previously. Asked for his impressions of the CAR on his return to the French capital, he described a ramshackle state that had sunk further and further into an enduring crisis in the wake of the series of mutinies and violent coups that had taken place since 1996. "The only change I noticed was that trees have grown along the entire length of the Avenue des Martyrs", explained Thierry Bingaba. "Apart from that, I saw building sites that were in the same state they were in ten years ago".¹⁹² Time appears to have stood still in the CAR capital. The country is at a standstill in the interior, especially in the north and the situation, which is already extremely bad, could quite possibly get worse. For the last two years and as many rainy seasons, hundreds of thousands of people have been camped in the forest because they are afraid of armed men – insurgents, road-cutters and government soldiers – who have chased them from their homes and continue to threaten them. The children of these displaced people no longer go to school. Moreover, there are no more public sector schools. The Central African Republic is a phantom state. In the north, it no longer provides any service to its citizens. It only frightens them.¹⁹³

In this context, the international community must ensure it makes the correct analysis. The CAR is first and foremost in the throes of an endogenous crisis, a vortex of institutional problems. As such, it attracts all types of foreign assistance, including well-intentioned assistance as much as the surplus soldiers of neighbouring countries or French soldiers. Secondly, the CAR is the object of multifaceted domination: by the post-colonial power, France; by other states in central Africa, in the form of regional cooperation; and by neighbouring Chad, the troublesome protector of the Bozizé regime, following in the footsteps of Libya, which had played the same role for the tottering Ange-Félix Patassé government. Finally, it cannot be denied there is a temptation to destabilise this phantom state. However, the country has more often succumbed to internal rather than external threats, at least so far.

Darfur does not therefore provide a good reason for being interested in the CAR. However, in the absence of anything better, the crisis in the west of Sudan, on which

international attention has focused, has already brought the CAR a good deal more resources and interlocutors than it has ever had in the past. This is an ambiguous beneficial effect because, unless it integrates this assistance into a concerted strategy to fight the "CAR sickness", it runs the risk of doing the opposite and supplying fuel for the internal crisis. In this respect, it seems disturbing that the international community has not learned any lessons from the fall of the Patassé regime. He also came to power through democratic elections but lost his legitimacy by the way he used the power entrusted to him at the ballot box.

It is to be feared that the imminent deployment of a European force in the north east of the CAR might transform the international operation in Bangui – led politically by BONUCA but without the multiple humanitarian (UNDP, UNHCR, WFP, NGOs etc.) and military (FOMUC, France and, tomorrow, the European-Chad-CAR force) instruments, into becoming a blind Shiva. All the more so because the loss of institutional capacity does not prevent the CAR state functioning and operating on the basis of providing the biggest possible benefits for its authorised representatives. Through ignorance or convenience, the international community has so far preferred to let itself be taken in by appearances rather than get to grips with the realities.

Moreover, the persistent uncertainties about France's new Africa policy weaken international involvement in the CAR. Seven months after his election to the Élysée in May 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy has still not put into practice his stated intention to break with the policy of his predecessors, notably Jacques Chirac. However, it would be premature and imprudent to conclude that continuing support for Operation Boali means that France will continue to intervene in its former colonies. As with the sharing of roles that Paris negotiated with South Africa on the issue of President Bozizé's bodyguard and, more generally, the reorganisation of the CAR army, the pressure that France puts on its European partners to encourage them to play a role in the north east of the CAR may be interpreted as a sign that it wants to hand over responsibility and move towards disengagement.

For the time being, Paris is committed to supplying the bulk of the troops and funds necessary for the EUFOR-Chad/CAR mission. However, this is probably the price it is willing to pay to ensure it can retreat in good order and pass responsibility for stabilising the CAR on to the international community: after one year, the EUFOR-Chad/CAR mission is in fact likely to give way to a

¹⁹² Crisis Group interview, Paris, June 2007.

¹⁹³ Cf. the reports, published in September 2007, by Human Rights Watch, *op. cit.*, and Amnesty International, "Central African Republic: Civilians in Peril in the Wild North", 19 September 2007.

UN peacekeeping operation.¹⁹⁴ However, the situation in the CAR, in the context of what is happening in Darfur, highlights the existence of a structure similar to the one that exists in the west of Sudan: the same causes have the same effects, the north east of the CAR could become another Darfur because it also has historically been marginalised and abandoned by the central government in Bangui in the same way that the land between Geneina, Al Fasher and Nyala was by Khartoum.

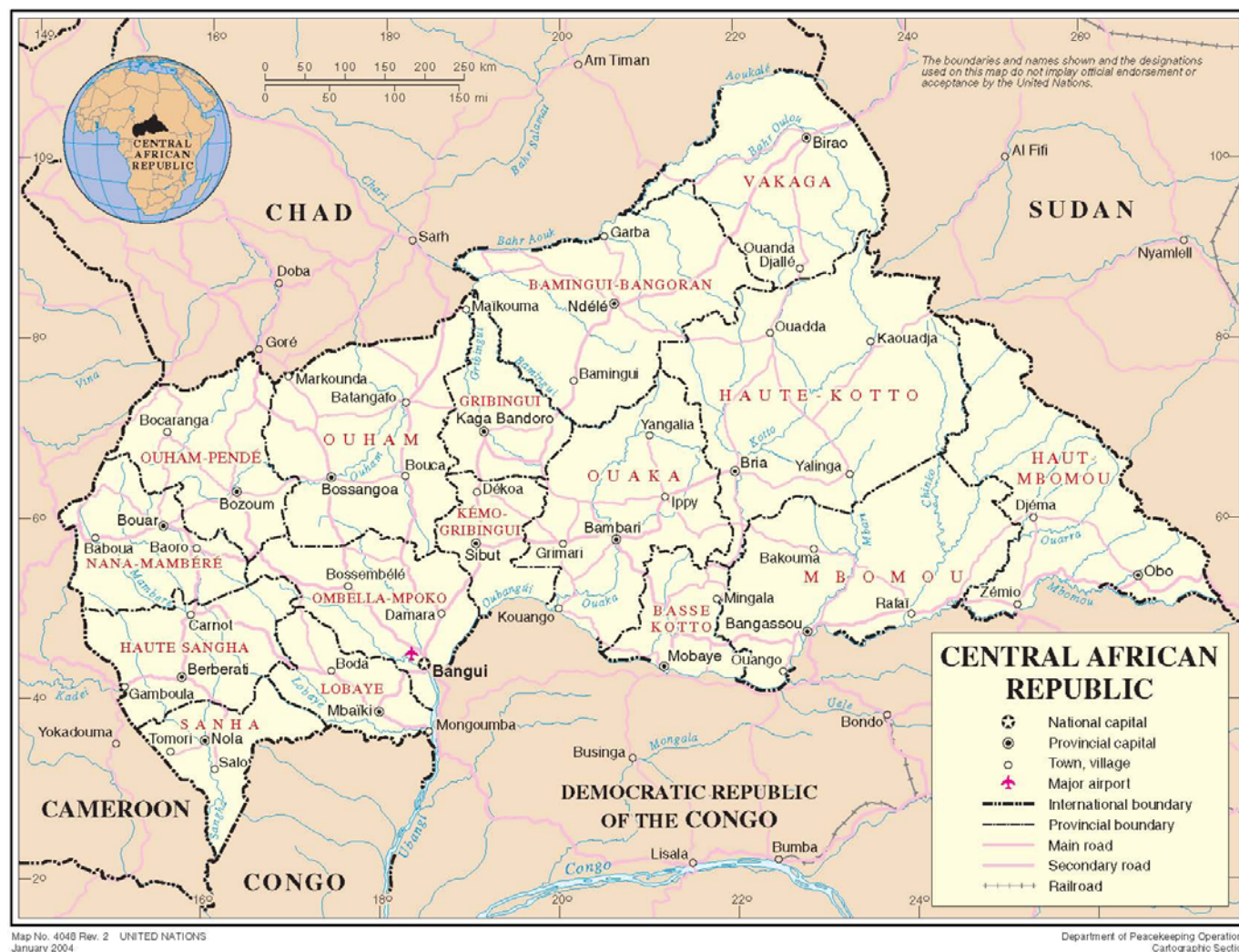
In both cases, the failure of the state enabled a murderous implosion. Both states have proved incapable of asserting their sovereign attributes on the margins of their territory other than by repression, and, in the case of Sudan, even subcontracted its monopoly of legitimate violence to militias that it armed (or to an army that was so much like a militia that it was hard to tell them apart). Whether the European operation finally takes place or not, and whatever the practical details of the operation, one thing is certain: it alone will not be enough to resolve the existential problem of a state so devoid of institutional capacity that it has been reduced to a shadow.

Nairobi/Brussels, 13 December 2007

¹⁹⁴ Resolution 1778 provided for “a possible United Nations operation depending on the developments in the situation”. UNSC S/RES/1778, 25 September 2007, para. 10.

APPENDIX A

MAP OF THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC



APPENDIX B

GLOSSARY

FEA	French Equatorial Africa. A group of five territories (the future Gabon, Cameroon, Republic of Congo, Chad and the Central African Republic) created on 15 January 1910 to facilitate French colonial administration in central Africa.
FWA	French West Africa. A federation of eight territories (the future Senegal, Mali, Burkina-Faso, Togo, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Niger and Guinea) created on 16 June 1895 to facilitate French colonial administration West Africa.
APRD	Popular Army for the Restoration of the Republic and Democracy (Armée populaire pour la restauration de la République et la démocratie). Rebel movement in the north west composed of village self-defence committees and members of the former Presidential Guard of Ange-Félix Patassé. The APRD is led by lieutenant Florian Ndjadder from Bamako, Mali. In the field, two local officers, Laurent Djimweï and Maradass Lakoué, command a fluctuating force, estimated at a few hundred men.
Boganda, Barthélémy	The first Catholic priest in Oubangui-Chari. Leader of MESAN, he became the territory's deputy at the French National Assembly in Paris in 1946. He died in an accident on the eve of independence, on 29 March 1959.
Bokassa, Jean-Bedel	President of the Central African Republic, 1966-1979, self-proclaimed emperor in 1974, under the name of Bokassa 1st.
BONUCA	United Nations Peace-building Office in the Central African Republic (Bureau des Nations unies en Centrafrique)
Bozizé, François	President of the Central African Republic after the 15 March 2003 coup, elected in May 2005.
BPSI	Protection and Security of Institutions Battalion (Bataillon de protection et de sécurité des institutions), the official name of the Presidential Guard.
CEMAC	Central African Economic and Monetary Community (Communauté économique et monétaire de l'Afrique Centrale), now known as CEEAC-ECCAS.
CEN-SAD	Community of Saharan-Sahel States (Communauté des États sahélo-sahariens), an international organisation of 21 African states created on 4 February 1998.
CMRN	, Military Committee for National Recovery (Comité militaire de redressement national), formed by the Chief of Staff of the Central African Army, General André Kolingba to lead the country in 1979.
CPC	Coordination of Central African Patriots (Comité militaire de redressement national), unarmed political opposition to the Patassé regime, based in France and led by Jean-Paul Ngoupandé.
Dacko, David	Twice president of the Central African Republic, 1959-1965 and 1979-1981. Died in Yaoundé on 21 November 2003.
Demafouth, Jean-Jacques	Former minister of defence under President Patassé, arrested on 26 August 2001 for an attempted coup, exiled in Paris.
EFAO	French Operational Assistance Force (Eléments français d'assistance opérationnelle), the official name of French soldiers in Central Africa between 1980 and 1998. Nicknamed "Barracudas" by Central Africans.
FACA	Central African Armed Forces (Forces armées centrafricaines)
FDC	Central African Democratic Front (Front démocratique centrafricain), led by Commander Hassan Justin. Rebel movement operating in the north; part of the UFDR.

FDPC	Democratic Front for the Central African People (Front démocratique pour le peuple centrafricain), led by Colonel Abdoulaye Miskine (real name – Martin Koumtamadji). Rebel movement in the north west.
FOMUC	Multinational Force in the Central African Republic (Force multinationale en Centrafrique). Force of 350 soldiers composed of troops from Chad, Gabon and the Republic of Congo, mandated by CEMAC to ensure the security of President Ange-Félix Patassé, the reorganisation of the armed forces and oversee mixed patrols along the border with Chad.
FUC	United Front for Change (Front uni pour le changement). The faction of the armed Chadian rebellion most supported by Khartoum, and led by Mahamat Nour.
GAPLC	Patriotic Action Group for the Liberation of Central Africa (Groupe d'action patriotique de libération de la Centrafrique), led by Michel Djotodia. Rebel movement in the north east; part of the UFDR.
Goumba, Abel	Twice former prime minister and former vice-president of the Central African Republic from 12 December 2003 to mid-March 2005.
Kolingba, André	General who came to power after a coup in 1981. Governed the Central African Republic until 1992.
Mantion, Jean-Claude	Former member of the French Secret Service (Direction générale de la sécurité extérieure, DGSE), stationed in Central Africa for thirteen years (1980-1992) to support the presidency of André Kolingba.
MESAN	Movement for the Social Evolution of Black Africa (Mouvement pour l'évolution sociale de l'Afrique noire), founded by Barthélémy Boganda.
MINURCAT	United Nations Mission for Central Africa and Chad (Mission des Nations unies pour la Centrafrique et le Tchad). Deployment planned for 2008.
MINURCA	United Nations Mission in the Central African Republic (Mission des Nations unies en République centrafricaine). Created in March 1998 and withdrawn in February 2000.
MISAB	Inter-African Mission to Monitor Implementation of the Bangui Accords (Mission interafricaine de surveillance des accords de Bangui)
MLCJ	Movement of Central African Liberators for Justice (Mouvement des libérateurs centrafricains pour la justice), led by captain Abakar Sabone.
MPLC	Movement for the Liberation of the Central African People (Mouvement pour la libération du peuple centrafricain). Founded in January 1979 by Ange-Félix Patassé.
MPRC	Patriotic Movement for the Restoration of the Central African Republic (Mouvement patriotique pour la restauration de la République centrafricaine), led by Steve Guéret.
Ngoupandé, Jean-Paul	Former prime minister under Ange-Félix Patassé, now an adviser of President Bozizé.
Patassé, Ange-Félix	President of the Republic, elected on 22 October 1993 and re-elected in 1999. Overthrown by a coup led by François Bozizé on 15 March 2003.
UFDR	Union of Democratic Forces for Unity (Union des forces démocratiques pour le rassemblement). Coalition of three armed groups in the north west, created in September 2006 in Rwanda; includes the MLJC, GAPLC and the FDC.
Ziguélé, Martin	Former prime minister of Ange-Félix Patassé, between April 2001 and March 2003.

APPENDIX C

THE ECONOMY'S GREAT LEAP BACKWARDS

On the economic front, the CAR has taken “a great leap backwards”¹⁹⁵ since the 1970s. According to the UNDP Report on Human Development 2006, which places Central Africa 172nd out of 177 countries, 67 per cent of the population now live in poverty, with an income of less than one dollar per day. Coined by the father of the nation, Barthélemy Boganda, and included in the preamble of the Constitution, the CAR’s fine motto “one man is as good as another”, *Zo kwe zo* in Sango, the national language, is belied every day by the country’s reality. Life expectancy, which is falling all the time, dropped below 40 in 2005, according to the UNDP. AIDS is partly to blame. CAR has an average prevalence rate of 16.5 per cent, compared to 2 per cent in 1984, making it the Central African country most affected by the pandemic.¹⁹⁶ More than one child in ten (11.5 per cent) dies before the age of five. Less than half of adults are literate and the rate of school enrolment fell from 63 to 43 per cent between 1995 and 2000 (it is only 8 per cent in the extreme north east, on the border with Darfur and home to a rebellion).

The industrial structure, which was never very developed, has been reduced to fragments: a brewery, a plywood factory and some forestry companies – all foreign – which, since the sector was stabilised in 2003, has employed 5,000 permanent workers and as many temporary workers. This is half the total number of jobs in the formal sector of the economy. These companies are known locally as citizen enterprises because they are the only ones who pay tax and obey government regulations.

The state currently obtains 18 per cent of its income from the timber industry, more than from mining, which is in decline. In 2005, it produced only 5kg of gold, while its flagship export – diamonds for jewellery – fell to about 400,000 carats per year, two thirds of the production levels of 30 years ago. At least, this is the figure for official exports. The high incidence of smuggling means that three times more Central African gemstones (1,200,000 carats) appear in Antwerp. This traffic is carried out to the detriment of the state, which

is always hungry for taxes,¹⁹⁷ and especially the 8,000 individual diamond prospectors, each of whom sustains ten people, that is, as many as the cotton industry, about 2 per cent of the population. The cotton industry is not in a good condition either. In 2006, only 3,500 tonnes of cotton-grain were exported,¹⁹⁸ a small fraction of the 50,000 tonnes produced in the 1970s. This contrasts with the 200,000 tonnes harvested by neighbouring Chad in 2006. The coffee crop has also become marginal, falling from 15,000 tonnes per year to less than 3,000 tonnes grown on small family plantations. The main sources of cash in the rural world have dried up.

At the same time, the staple food crops offers little more than a means of subsistence. The endemic insecurity, which makes any attempt at marketing dangerous, means that peasants no longer take their products to market – to such an extent that Bangui imports onions and mangoes from Cameroon, even though they grow in abundance in the CAR. It is also to this neighbouring country that herders, often the Peuhl, have taken their livestock. “The pastoralists complain about the insecurity caused by the road-cutters, the *zaraguina*: not only the theft of livestock but also the blackmail and kidnapping of children”.¹⁹⁹ The constant deterioration of transport infrastructure since independence has done the rest. In the CAR, the potholes in the rare tarmac roads have been renamed “ostrich nests”. The former prime minister of the ephemeral government of national unity in 1996, Jean-Paul Ngoupandé, currently special adviser to President Bozizé, summarised the situation in the interior of the country as “a return to a pre-colonial life”.²⁰⁰

For all that, life in Bangui, by far the biggest city in the country, with a population of about 600,000 habitants, is scarcely more inviting. There is not even running water or electricity for solvent households and there is no medium-term expectation of any improvement. The dilapidation of the hydroelectric plant at Boali Falls, which has operated day and night with no replacement of equipment since 1976,²⁰¹ means that the CAR only

¹⁹⁵ Crisis Group interview, international cooperation official, Bangui, July 2007.

¹⁹⁶ Created by the UNDP, the website of the Humanitarian and Development Team Central African Republic (<http://hcpt.jot.com>) is the best source of statistical data on the CAR.

¹⁹⁷ In the RCA, the fiscal charge is 12 per cent per carat, compared to 2 to 2.5 per cent in Cameroon and Congo-Kinshasa.

¹⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview, minister of rural development, Charles Massi, Bangui, July 2007.

¹⁹⁹ Yves Boulvert, “Retour à Bangui”, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

²⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, Paris, June 2007.

²⁰¹ Crisis Group interview, minister of energy and mines, lieutenant-colonel Charles Ndoutingai, Bangui, July 2007.

produces 18MW of electricity, while the capital alone consumes at least 22MW. Power cuts affecting entire suburbs are the daily consequence. However, the percentage of households supplied with electricity is low: 8.6 per cent. The percentage of households supplied with running water in Bangui is even lower than in the interior: 22 per cent compared to 34 per cent in rural areas.

In most Bangui suburbs, at least in the dry season, people buy water by the drum from tankers. The number of households paying for the provision of running water is extremely low: 8,500. Subscribers to electricity services are not much more numerous: 14,000. It is an indication of the weakness of purchasing power in a country where, in summer 2007, the accumulated wages in arrears owed to the approximately 20,000 civil servants was as high as 33 months. As for retirement and other pensions, arrears are now counted in three-monthly periods: the current number is seventeen, which is more than four years.

APPENDIX D

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Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a twelve-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and printed copy to officials in foreign ministries and international organisations and made available simultaneously on the website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

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Crisis Group's international headquarters are in Brussels, with advocacy offices in Washington DC (where it is based as a legal entity), New York, London and Moscow. The organisation currently operates twelve regional offices (in Amman, Bishkek, Bogotá, Cairo, Dakar, Islamabad, Istanbul, Jakarta, Nairobi, Pristina, Seoul and Tbilisi) and has local field representation in sixteen additional locations (Abuja, Baku, Beirut, Belgrade, Colombo, Damascus, Dili, Dushanbe, Jerusalem, Kabul, Kampala, Kathmandu, Kinshasa, Port-au-Prince, Pretoria and Yerevan). Crisis Group currently covers some 60 areas of actual or potential conflict across four continents. In Africa, this includes Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea, Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda, Western Sahara and Zimbabwe; in Asia,

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