Central African Republic: a silent crisis crying out for help

One of the world’s poorest countries, CAR is a cauldron of turbulence that threatens to undermine peace efforts in Central Africa.

In a continent beset with bloody conflicts often triggering banner headlines, the Central African Republic (CAR), located in an unstable triangle bordering the Democratic Republic of the Congo, southern Sudan and Chad, is a silent crisis crying out for increased international donor support and media attention. A year ago, with the world’s eyes riveted on Iraq, CAR suffered another in a long history of coups and uprisings when General Bozize led an army of insurgents to topple elected President Ange-Felix Patasse in March 2003. Today, transitional institutions have been established and an electoral calendar that envisions elections in January 2005 has been issued. Nevertheless, the overall situation remains fragile and volatile. In spite of its economic potential - rich in timber, gold, diamonds and uranium - CAR ranks 154th among the world’s 174 poorest countries with 95% of its population living on less than US two dollars a day. Over a million of its 3.7 million population are isolated and without access to health care, education and basic services. With 200,000 people internally displaced, farming has been disrupted and the country’s food security is precarious. Some 15% of CAR’s population suffers from HIV/AIDS, making it one of the world’s 10 worst hit countries, while the number of children orphaned by AIDS continues to escalate. Preventable diseases like polio, malaria, measles and meningitis, already at epidemic levels, have reached a new high and taken a daily toll.

While the situation in the capital, Bangui has improved slightly, the security situation outside the capital has continued to deteriorate, with serious human rights violations reportedly being perpetrated by armed groups, including supporters who had helped General Bozize seize power. Some of the 42,000 refugees who fled into neighbouring Chad are now trickling back home. It is widely recognized that there can be no lasting progress in tackling these grave challenges unless sustainable stability is restored. Security and stability have been problematic since military mutinies in 1996, triggered by the armed forces’ grievances over unpaid salary arrears. The ensuing internal conflict led to regional and subsequently UN peacekeeping intervention. The Economic and Monetary Community of Central African States currently has 350 soldiers based in Bangui, with a limited role and capacity to act. The logistical and financial support to them and to the national army appears insufficient to restore security control across the country.

As news headlines focus elsewhere, the United Nations is deeply concerned about the serious financial difficulties confronting the CAR where important progress made towards restoring constitutional order and peace risks being compromised or even overturned. The inability of the transitional government to pay salaries, including for security forces, could result in defeating the objective of achieving a durable peace.

The international community should provide immediate support not only to stabilize the transition, but also to enable viable economic development. So far only some $700,000 has been raised in response to a special humanitarian appeal made by the UN in November 2003 seeking a total of almost $17 million. As the UN strives to promote peace in the Central African region, a stable CAR is a necessary condition for durable stability in neighbouring countries without which the wider region could easily be engulfed in unforeseen turmoil.

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