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CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC | Hundreds Killed After Fighting Breaks Out

Local sources are reporting that almost 1,000 people have been killed in the last week after fighting broke out between the Seleka rebel coalition and anti-Balaka groups in Bangui, capital of the Central African Republic (CAR).

On Dec. 9, the Red Cross confirmed 400 deaths in Bangui. Local eyewitnesses report a number of unburied or uncollected bodies in many parts of the city.

Seleka, a predominantly Muslim rebel coalition, took power in a coup in March 2013, suspending the constitution, dissolving the government and National Assembly, and eventually installing one of its leaders, Michael Djotodia, as president. In September, Djotodia officially disbanded Seleka. Many rebels refused to disarm and began sectarian killings, looting and burning villages, with worrying reports in November of an influx of extremists from other countries. The sustained and severe human rights violations eventually resulted in retributive violence following the emergence of anti-Seleka groups commonly referred to as 'anti-Balaka' (anti-machete), and largely composed of ex-Seleka members, vigilante villagers and former members of the national army.

The latest fighting intensified after daybreak on Dec. 5 when armed anti-Balaka groups declared an invasion of Bangui. Local sources reported the sound of heavy artillery in the Gobongo, Boy Rabe, Kassai and Boieng districts before the anti-Balaka forces retreated to the hills and forests surrounding Bangui. Muslims in the Km5 district were reported to have subsequently taken to the streets destroying property belonging to non-Muslims. Unconfirmed reports state members of the Seleka militia went from door to door searching for men, destroying property, and killing civilians. Victims included a pastor of the Elim church in the PK12 district and his grandchildren. According to local reports, Seleka members also abducted his four children. Similar atrocities are being reported from the interior of the country.

Over the weekend, reprisal attacks on Christians continued in which families with young men were reportedly targeted. In districts across the capital, civilians are currently seeking refuge in church buildings, while others are hiding in the bush or at Bangui airport.

While the anti-Balaka groups have been generally described as Christian militia, their actions have been condemned by the Church in CAR, which is calling for peace, the disarming of all armed groups and national reconciliation. Church leaders have been working with imams in the tense months following the coup to bring reconciliation, and calling for a return to peaceful coexistence between the two religious communities.

On Dec. 5, the UN Security Council approved a proposal to increase the numbers of French and African Union troops in the country with a mandate to disarm militias. On Dec. 9, two French paratroopers were killed in Bangui in a clash with unidentified men.

Also on Dec. 9, and following comments by President Hollande questioning the effectiveness of his leadership, Djotodia allegedly implied on radio that there would be fighting between French troops and Seleka, and the country would be divided along sectarian lines if he is removed from power. According to unconfirmed reports, these remarks were also being broadcast in mosques and could stoke sectarian tensions even further.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "CSW condemns the killings of civilians and the widespread violations of human rights, including of freedom of religion or belief. We echo the call of the Church in the Central African Republic for peace, and urge both sides of the conflict to embrace reconciliation and co-existence. The restoration of security is paramount, as is the need to combat impunity. We therefore welcome the Security Council's decision to increase troop numbers in the CAR, and call for investigations to identify those suspected of involvement in gross human rights violations with a view to bringing them to justice. We also urge UN member states to ensure that the international forces are sufficiently resourced and to respond swiftly to the worsening humanitarian crisis in the country."