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CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC | UN Human Rights Council to Discuss Killings

The UN Human Rights Council (HRC) has announced it will be holding a special session on Jan. 20 to discuss the human rights situation in the Central African Republic (CAR). The session follows the release of a preliminary report by a human rights team from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), which found deliberate killings of civilians from both religious communities “continue to occur with impunity”.

In its preliminary findings, the four-person OHCHR team visited the country Dec. 12-14, 2013 and documented numerous violations by Seleka, anti-Balaka and civilians that occurred between Dec. 5-6. These include sexual violence, torture, enforced disappearances, the targeting of civilians based on their religion and attacks on places of worship.

The OHCHR team also received testimonies pointing to the complicity of Chadian troops in violence. Chadian troops form a significant part of the International Support Mission to the Central African Republic (MISCA), the larger internationally mandated pan-African peacekeeping forces that superseded the Multinational Force of Central Africa (FOMAC). The Seleka coalition also has Chadians in its ranks, and there have been consistent reports of elements within the Chadian military assisting the group, including by equipping it with arms and FOMAC uniforms with Chadian insignia in order to undermine disarmament efforts. Local witnesses have also related instances when Chadian troops and Seleka members have armed Muslim civilians.

In December 2013, it was announced that Chadian troops were to be pulled out of the capital city, Bangui, after clashes with demonstrators and Burundian soldiers, and redeployed to the north of the country. According to local sources, as heavily armed Seleka fighters began withdrawing to the north they set fire to village storehouses as they passed through Damara town to the north of Bangui. As they headed for Dékoa in the south-east of the country, other Chadian troops and Seleka fighters are reported to have driven people into the bush and set fire to their huts and storehouses. Local hostility and retaliatory violence against Chadian civilians has caused at least 20,000 of them to flee the country.

Violence continues despite the resignation on Jan. 10 of the Seleka leader Michel Djotodia as interim president. The country’s National Transitional Council (NTC) plans to elect a new interim president on Jan. 18. A local source has warned of the potentially destabilizing presence in Bangui of foreign Seleka fighters, who are allegedly refusing to enter into any form of dialogue, and stressed the urgent need for the effective disarmament of all parties, since “Seleka and

Muslim civilians continue to receive pistols, grenades, AK rifles and machetes,” and non-Muslim youth “are salvaging weapons from mosques that have been destroyed, and making use of them.” According to the OHCHR report, French forces abandoned the disarmament effort after the initial disarming of Seleka was deemed to have rendered Muslim communities vulnerable to anti-Balaka retaliatory attacks.

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “CSW welcomes the decision by the Human Rights Council to convene a special session on the situation in the CAR at this critical time. Given the continuing security vacuum in the country, the international community must formulate concrete plans to address this crisis before the cycle of retaliatory violence spirals out of control, including the empowering of leaders from both faith communities and other people of good will who are working for peace and reconciliation in the most difficult of circumstances. The restoration of security is paramount and would be greatly enhanced by a security presence that is trusted by every sector of the local population to initiate an effective and unbiased disarmament process. Unfortunately, Chadian forces appear to have gained the mistrust of a significant section of the local population. Given the gravity of some of the allegations against them, and pending an investigation, it is questionable whether they are best placed to play a significant role in peacekeeping efforts at this time.”