



7.8.14

## **CAR | Seleka Attack Church Compound Sheltering Displaced Civilians**

At least 20 people were killed and 22 injured when Seleka fighters and armed Muslim civilians attacked St. Joseph's Catholic Cathedral in Bambari City, Central African Republic, situated 203 miles northeast of the capital Bangui, on July 7. The church was sheltering 12,000 displaced civilians.

The attack began at 3 p.m. when the armed fighters entered the grounds of the cathedral shooting indiscriminately. As well as causing deaths and injuries, the assailants razed 20 buildings, burnt three cars belonging to the bishop and carried away two others, along with every motorcycle in the compound.

Catholic Church representatives criticized French troops for their perceived delay in responding to the attack. A French military spokesperson stated the troops positioned themselves between the armed Muslim group and the Christians by 4 p.m.

The attack on St. Joseph's Church was allegedly carried out in retaliation for the killing of a Muslim civilian by anti-Balaka forces and occurred on the day the opposing militia groups were due to hold peace talks in Bangui in preparation for the upcoming national reconciliation initiative in Brazzaville in Congo. The talks have stalled indefinitely due to disagreements within Seleka. CAR President Samba Panza has reiterated her vision for the interim government to espouse political dialogue, reconciliation and justice. She has warned that "masterminds of violence" must be prosecuted and participation in political reconciliation should not be seen as compensation for violence and impunity.

Seleka, a predominantly Muslim rebel coalition, took power in a coup in March 2013 and installed one of its leaders, Michael Djotodia, as president. In September 2013, Djotodia officially disbanded Seleka. Many rebels refused to disarm and continued the sectarian attacks that had characterized the militia's activities since late 2012, including killing, looting and burning villages, amidst worrying reports in November 2013 of an influx of extremists from other countries. The sustained and severe human rights violations resulted in retributive violence following the emergence of anti-Seleka groups commonly referred to as 'anti-Balaka' (anti-AK 47 bullets), and largely composed of ex-Seleka members, vigilante villagers and former members of the national army.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide said, "We extend our condolences to the families of those killed during yesterday's senseless attack on a place of worship and on unarmed civilians who were already suffering the adversity of displacement. We call for the relevant authorities to ensure that the perpetrators are brought to justice and urge

the deployed French troops to adequately fulfil their mandate in ensuring that civilians in Bambari are protected. We also call on the international community to ensure adequate and timely support for President Samba Panza and her interim government during this very difficult transition period.”