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CAR | CSW Calls for Civilian Protection Amid Clashes

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is calling for the UN peacekeeping mission to prioritize the protection of civilians in the Central African Republic (CAR), regardless of ethnicity or religion, amid fighting between increasingly fragmented armed groups in the country.

An estimated 85 civilians have died, 76 have been wounded and nearly 11,000 have been displaced after two factions of the Seleka clashed. The Seleka, a predominantly Muslim rebel coalition that seized power in a coup in March 2013, was officially disbanded in September 2013; however, many rebels refused to disarm and sectarian violence increased. Following the advent of the anti-Balaka armed group in late 2013, the Seleka moved to the north of the country, where many of its members originate.

The warring Seleka factions are the Front Populaire pour la Renaissance de la Centrafrique (FPRC), comprising members of the Rounga and Goula ethnic groups, and the Union pour la Paix en Centrafrique (UPC), whose members are from the Fulani ethnic group.

The clashes reportedly broke out after the UPC seized cattle belonging to the Goula people in Bria on Nov. 21, triggering a response from the FPRC that left eight people dead. A United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) unit was present and is said to have separated the groups, allowing the UPC fighters to flee. The FPRC then allegedly singled out ethnic Fulani civilians, carrying out house-to-house searches, looting and abducting and killing residents. FPRC members also occupied hospital buildings, preventing wounded Fulani residents from receiving medical treatment.

The UN Special Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide, Adama Dieng, has warned that the violence could rapidly escalate if reprisal attacks are carried out. He also called for an investigation to assess whether the incidents could be classed as crimes against humanity.

The security situation in CAR has steadily deteriorated in the country's restive interior since September 2016. The conflict, which took on a religious dimension as a battle between the Seleka and anti-Balaka escalated, also has an underlying ethnic element, as evidenced by the fracturing of armed groups along ethnic lines. In early November, two anti-Balaka factions clashed in Bocaranga in the north west of the country, leading to the deaths of two people. On Oct. 4, the head of CAR's armed forces, Marcel Mombeka, was assassinated as he drove through PK5 district, a predominantly Muslim neighborhood in the capital Bangui.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We are deeply saddened to hear of yet more lives lost in CAR and the displacement of thousands of vulnerable civilians. We strongly urge MINUSCA to prioritize the protection of civilians, regardless of ethnicity or religion, as they suffer disproportionately during violent clashes between armed group, and are often the targets of retaliation. These latest developments underscore the importance of fully disarming all armed groups in the territory and establishing justice mechanisms to hold perpetrators to account. We call on the EU, as one of the largest donors to CAR, to prioritize support for the restoration of security and access to justice."