

Persistent Insecurity in the Central African Republic: Paoua, Bangassou and Obo SFB700 (C10 project) Research Brief 4 – March 2016

The GIGA-IAA research project on security governance, carried out within the German Science Foundation's SFB700 programme, set out to understand the relations between actors and institutions involved in maintaining security and stability in areas away from the capital city. The project thereby seeks to decipher actions and structures that contribute to or undermine stability and social cohesion. The project researches both South Sudan and the Central African Republic. This research brief presents key findings of eight weeks of fieldwork in the Central African Republic in early 2016. We, Prof. Dr. Andreas Mehler, Dr. Lotje de Vries and Tim Glawion, revisited three localities one year after our first trip in early 2015: Paoua in the Ouham-Pende, Bangassou in Mbomou and Obo in Haut-Mbomou prefecture. In each locality, we spoke to state authorities, as well as key actors like chiefs, traders and church leaders. We also organised focus group discussions with various groups of society.

With peaceful presidential elections having taken place in early 2016, state authorities slowly redeploying to the peripheries and the United Nations mission nearing full force, it seems the Central African Republic (CAR) is entering a post-conflict phase. However, research in Paoua, Bangassou and Obo shows security structures and actors in the 'post-conflict' phase do not differ significantly from those before or during the conflict. The next security deterioration could be imminent if local realities aren't taken serious. Many things have been pushed back until "après les élections", meaning that the pressure and the task burden on the new leadership is immense. To grapple with continuing exactions by non-state armed groups, the redeployment of the army (FACA) is recurrently proposed. In past times, however, the FACA were more often part of the problem rather than the solution – as was the case again recently in Obo. The UN mission is filling the state void with increasing numbers of personnel, but continues to have difficulties in eradicating insecurity. This stems in part from focusing on Séléka and Anti-Balaka clashes and atrocities – two supposed entities that never truly existed as such and that have by now melted into long-held inter-communal tensions. Dealing with these armed groups through nation-wide approaches, such as a blueprint DDR, thus risks further exasperating local feelings of marginalization. Positive signs should not be neglected: The Muslim versus Christian narrative has weakened in all three localities (although it seems to have deepened in the capital Bangui), the elections have raised high hopes of a better future and the vast majority of Central Africans are strongly opposed to continued fighting.

Bangassou, Capital of the Mbomou Prefecture, 740 km from Bangui:

Bangassou is the capital of the Mbomou Prefecture, which has around 180 000 inhabitants. The town borders the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) across the river Mbomou. Security perceptions are divided between a comparatively high level of security within town and continued insecurity in the wider region caused by ex-Séléka groups and most recently the Lord's Resistance Army. Many locals want to eliminate these groups, but lack the force to do so. MINUSCA, on the other hand, has the capacity, but prefers negotiating with ex-Séléka groups while awaiting a possible state (re)integration. The relatively high level of security within Bangassou remains very fragile: state policing institutions have been redeploying to Bangassou, slowly reactivating former state justice chains. However, their positive impact might be of short duration, as key links are still malfunctioning, i.e. the prison and the court of appeal, disabling the sentencing of criminals. MINUSCA has a strong presence in the arena – multiple patrols per day and at night, armored vehicles, and controls on all four town entrances – making larger incidences in town implausible. Their effectiveness in promoting accommodation among actors, however, is limited. Crucially, non-state alternative policing institutions – a mediation committee and auto-defense groups –

continue their activities. While often efficient in reducing crime within their quarters, auto-defense groups could divide society in the long-term, as their members – grouped by arrondissement and ethnicity – are skeptical of outsiders, and their origins overlap with those of groups of bandits. Bangassou thus needs a shift away from protective narratives “against” other groups towards stronger attempts of peacefully integrating different actors.

Obo, Capital of the Haut-Mbomou Prefecture, 1300 km from Bangui:

Obo, the capital of the Haut-Mbomou prefecture is a lightly populated area at the border triangle with South Sudan and the DRC. The town was never affected by the crisis that touched most parts of the rest of the country. Tensions between the Peulh, Muslim and Zande communities have been contained by the presence of the Ugandan army and their American advisors trying to find Joseph Kony. As partner in this mission, Obo is also one of the rare places, in which the FACA always remained (partly) deployed. When the contingent was finally replaced by new elements, after being stuck for more than two years, social cohesion was put at risk. After the arrest of a Muslim youth transporting ammunition, tensions in the Muslim quarter ran high and the FACA took up position to – reportedly – ‘deal with the neighbourhood as they did in Bangui.’ Due to the intervention by the Prefect, supported by Ugandan forces, the situation was contained and the FACA lieutenant was sent back to Bangui to be replaced by a more moderate captain. Thus, the UPDF continues to play a key role in local policing. MINUSCA started deploying in October, but the population has no clear picture of their role besides organizing and securing the elections. The local security forces are limited to one police commissioner operating on his own with a few auxiliaries. The schism between the multiple challenges Obo is facing and the singular focus by the security forces, local elites and NGOs working in the area on the LRA threat continues to persist.

Paoua, Ouham-Pende prefecture, 490 Km from Bangui:

Paoua is the capital of one of the more populated sub-prefectures in the country. The close borders with Chad and Cameroon provide commercial opportunities, but also create challenges, such as the incursions by Chadian bandits and allegedly also the Chadian army. French Sangaris troops freed the town from Séléka occupation in late 2013, but ex-Séléka (MPC) recently regained a presence in the north. The Révolution et Justice (RJ) rebel group originally formed to protect citizens against the ex-Séléka, but lost coherence; the political leader of RJ joined the transitional government in Bangui and visibly lost control over some of his local commanders. Ironically, the MPC and RJ commanders formed an alliance in early 2016. Distrust between the dominant Kaba and the autochthonous Tali communities is fed by the armed groups who are taking on an ethnic tone – the Kaba RJ versus the Tali Groupes des Patriotes (GP); youngsters of that latter group have blocked access to the city via two main road axes and are being attacked by the RJ/MPC alliance. The Kaba-Tali divide has superseded the Muslim-Christian tensions, which have lost salience due to successful mediation and protection by an otherwise strongly criticized Cameroonian MINUSCA contingent. State authorities have slowly returned to Paoua, but police and gendarmerie are still understaffed and unarmed. A mediation board composed of religious leaders and a former APRD commander is approaching armed groups and counselling them to lay down their weapons. However, all armed groups in the region nervously await expected benefits from a large-scale DDR programme that has yet to take on clear contours.