

Disrupted social cohesion in the Central African Republic: Paoua, Bangassou and Obo SFB700 (C10 project) Research Brief 2 – April 2015

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 five weeks of fieldwork in the Central African Republic in early 2015. We, Dr. Lotje de Vries and Tim Glawion, visited three localities: 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 elders, youth and women.

Stability and social cohesion have been deteriorating in the Central African Republic (CAR) for decades. Yet, the past two years have marked an unprecedented level of violence, killing and looting. Formerly, deep-rooted distrust between fellow citizens of different origins, livelihoods or religious orientations was countered with a minimal level of peaceful cohabitation. The social fabric seems to have torn, however. The three localities visited for this project – Paoua, Bangassou and Obo – differ in their socio-economic relations, political history and geographic environment. Still, their conflict dynamics show interesting parallels: The current, relative calm in all three localities is maintained through the active involvement of key local elites and the acceptance of certain groups to endure perceived discrimination. Citizens have formed a narrative that the remaining Muslims in town are “real Central African” Muslims, while those who have left are seen as foreigners and collaborators with Séléka – a safe return in the near future thus seems impossible. In none of the localities the people felt free to travel to neighbouring towns for trading and farming. Threats outside town varied from racketeering bandits, armed nomads and rebel groups to remnants of the ex-Séléka and Anti-Balaka. External forces secure the three towns, while the local authorities remain understaffed and underfunded, especially at the level of the judiciary.

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

Paoua is the capital of one of the more populated sub-prefectures in the country. The region has around 240 000 inhabitants and borders Chad and Cameroon. The town is well-known for being home to former President Patassé, but also has a rebellious reputation, hosting various elusive armed groups. Séléka took power of the city in March 2013. When Séléka left town, Muslims with Chadian origins were accused of being collaborators and violently chased away. Citizens accuse Chadian cattle herders, or even the Chadian army, of ransacking villages in rural areas. No Anti-Balaka movement was formed in and around Paoua. Rather, the Révolution et Justice rebel group (RJ), that emerged from the remnants of the Armée Populaire pour la Restauration de la Démocratie (APRD), took up the role of protecting citizens. By now, RJ has split into smaller factions, which have a mixed reputation of protecting villages from armed gunmen, but also of committing abuses against civilians themselves. Although the Muslim-Christian divide had a clear impact on the town, there are also tensions between the two main ethnic groups, which are translated into competing bandit factions that target citizens along ethnic lines. On the civilian side, two competing mediation boards are trying to ease tensions through dialogue and interfaith counselling. Their achievements are respectable, but must be seen against the backdrop of coercion: the police and gendarmerie are barely armed, understaffed and seen as biased towards different ethnicities. Security provision thus falls back onto a Cameroonian MINUSCA contingent.

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

Bangassou is the capital of Mbomou Prefecture, which inhabits around 180 000 people. The town borders the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) across the river. The state decline can be easily observed: administrative buildings lie looted and abandoned around the town centre after witnessing two waves of pillaging, first by the Séléka in March 2013 and later by youth bandits who took advantage of the power vacuum when Séléka left in 2014. The Séléka ruled with a heavy hand in Bangassou, looting the Catholic mission as well as trade shops, which are mostly Muslim-owned. When the Séléka left, state administrators slowly started to return from across the river in the DRC. Local leaders have formed the Comité de Médiation du Mbomou (CMM) and its sub-branch the Plateforme Religieuse to ease tensions between Christians and Muslims. While their efforts did prevent larger hostilities from taking place, the vast majority of Muslims felt threatened enough to leave town, with those remaining feeling discriminated and persecuted. Just recently, Muslim representatives have accused both committees of tolerating (or even supporting) crimes against Muslims and have thus collectively resigned. On the other hand, Christian leaders described this move as politically motivated. Bangassou thus is not necessarily a model region and it is unclear if the shaky peace will last. Some key state officials, such as the Prefect, the Mayor and the Gendarmerie, try their best but do not receive enough support from Bangui. Above all, the absence of the judiciary hinders their functioning. The Congolese MINUSCA contingent is protecting the relative stability in town. However, free travel and trade outside town is threatened by checkpoints from ex-Séléka remnants and bandits.

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

In Obo, in the country's far east corner, close to the border with South Sudan, one can still observe the "ancienne Centrafrique", a trader in Bangassou remarked. Indeed, thanks to the great distance to the capital and the presence of the Ugandan army and their American advisors trying to find Joseph Kony, the crisis affecting the rest of the country hardly impacted this area. As a consequence, the army still stations around 50 men and the administration is more or less in place, although just as in the other localities the juridical branch is absent. Haut-Mbomou prefecture is a lightly populated area at the border triangle with South Sudan and the DRC. Obo, its capital, can barely muster more than ten thousand inhabitants. The administration has drastically reduced in scope since international backing has been cut in lieu of the wider sanctions against the national government as a result of Séléka taking power in Bangui in March 2013: around 250 soldiers deserted over the last years, the gendarmerie went from 15 to 2 men. The police had been closed since 2010, but a new commissioner was reinstated in November 2014 thanks to the UN Humanitarian Aviation Service who was willing to fly in a single police commissioner from Bangui. Starting before the current crisis and becoming ever more so, security and social tasks are outsourced to externals: the Ugandan army occasionally intervened within Obo outside their mandate, locals can use the Ugandan military hospital for treatment, school teachers are paid by parents and from market fees while the buildings were constructed by an NGO. There exists a schism between the multiple challenges Obo is facing and the singular focus by local elites and NGOs working in the area on the LRA threat. Since 2010, citizens feel confined to an imagined 'safe area' of five km around Obo. Arguably more problematic are armed poachers and bandits and conflicts between herders and farmers.