

# French Complicity in the Crisis in Central African Republic

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*Readers of the corporate media might conclude that France is carrying the White Man's Burden in the Central African Republic, without which the Africans would descend into barbarism. However, "it is France that is 'a burden' to CAR and its other former colonies in Africa, not the other way round."*

By the end of 2013, "the White man's burden" was proving too heavy to bear for France. Feeling militarily and materially overstretched, Paris cried for help from other European powers to help it shoulder "its responsibility" to quell violence, restore peace, order and political legitimacy in its backyards of Mali and Central African Republic, both in turmoil: the Islamists terrorists linked to Al-Qaida in Maghreb (Aqmi), Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria and so on, are wreaking havoc in northern Mali and Christians and Muslims are hacking each other to death in Central African Republic (CAR). Both Belgium and the United States responded positively by providing logistics and transport for the French and African troops.

France regards these countries as its backyard because CAR and other former French colonies in West and Central Africa are the constituents of the so-called "Françafrique," meaning that since independence they have kept close ties with France, the former colonial power, with which they are bound not only by defense agreements but also by a common currency, the CFA franc, which was pegged to the French franc, and therefore to the French Treasury, but is now pegged to the euro. As Colette Braeckman of the Belgian daily *Le Soir* argued on 31 December 2013, if France abandons these former colonies, it will represent not only a resignation in humanitarian terms but also a political signal, indicating the weakening of the French position on the international level. So 'abandon' is not really the term here because France cannot do without Africa.

In fact, former President Jacques Chirac acknowledged in 2008 that "without Africa, France will slide down into the rank of a third [world] power" (Philippe Leymarie, 2008, *Manière de voir*, n°79, février-mars 2008).

Chirac's predecessor François Mitterand already prophesied in 1957 that 'Without Africa, France will have no history in the 21st century' (François Mitterand, *Présence française et abandon*, 1957, Paris: Plon).

Former French foreign minister Jacques Godfrain for his part confirmed that "a little country [France], with a small amount of strength, we can move a planet because [of our] relations with 15 or 20 African countries..." This is consistent with France's "Françafrique" policies, which aim to perpetuate a particular "special relationship" with its former African colonies (Thabo Mbeki, "What the world got wrong in Côte d'Ivoire," *Foreign Policy*. April 29). So

France is intervening in Africa for the sake of its own survival as a country as well as a power. It is perfectly justified to argue that it is France that is “a burden” to CAR and its other former colonies in Africa, not the other way round. And so, total independence for CAR, both political and economic means the end of “Françafrique.”

### **United in Fear of China**

The reason why France counts on European support is because all the European powers are now united in their fear of China’s strong presence in Africa. As Colette Braeckman of the Belgian daily *Le Soir* explained on 31 December 2013, France counts on the solidarity of fellow former colonial powers (Britain, Belgium) in order not to completely give way to newcomers (Chinese but also Koreans, Turks ...) in these potentially rich and increasingly courted countries (rich in timber, agricultural, water and oil and mineral resources, including, diamond, oil and uranium in the case the Central African Republic). That is what is really at stake in France’s interventions both in Mali, Central African Republic and Ivory Coast in 2011 where Sarkozy removed Laurent Gbagbo by force and installed Alassane Ouattara. It is well known that both Ivory Coast’s Gbagbo and former president François Bozize of CAR got into trouble with the master – meaning France – because they turned to China for win-win cooperation. They were swiftly removed from power. In the case of CAR, France opted for Michel Djotodia who headed the Seleka (meaning “union” in the Sango language) rebel movement which overthrew Bozize in a matter of weeks. Did France not know that Seleka was an Islamist movement from the north of CAR linked to Al-Qaïdain in Maghreb (Aqmi) and Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria at the time? Paris surely did! But those uranium deals Bozize signed with China sealed the end of his regime.

### **From a “War of Regime Change” to a “War of Correction”**

The Seleka rebel movement overthrew Bozize and took power in March 2013. However, Seleka men refused to be disarmed and confined in the barracks, and for months multiplied abuses against civilians, mostly Christians from the south of the country. On 13 September 2013, CAR interim President Michel Djotodia announced that the Séléka had been dissolved. The horrors perpetrated by gangs of Seleka (including Chadians, Sudanese and other “Soldiers Without Borders”) led to the emergence of self-defense groups, the “Anti-balakas,” composed of Christians, simple peasants armed with machetes, but also former supporters of ousted president François Bozizé (Colette Braeckman, *Le Soir*, 28 December 2013). Initially, France launched what it called “Operation Sangaris” which was mainly a police operation, with well-defined objectives: to neutralize the Seleka fighters.

The French forces were operating in coordination with the Misca (UN Mission in the Central African) intervention force, which replaced FOMAC (Military force in Central Africa) composed of Chadian, Burundian and Congolese (Brazzaville) soldiers.

On 5 December 2013, while “Operation Sangaris” was still in its infancy, “Anti-Balaka” elements armed with machetes, launched attacks and massacred many Muslims whom they accused of supporting the Seleka from the north, predominantly Muslim too – divide and rule, the legacy of French colonialism is taking its toll. According to the weekly *Jeune Afrique*, it was not just retaliation, but a professional military attack coordinated by the son of former President Bozizé. More than 600 people were killed in the capital Bangui. Since then, the image of the conflict became greatly blurred. While they are saying that they are neutral, French forces are accused by Muslims of siding with Christians. Relations with

interim President Michel Djotodia deteriorated to hate level (especially due to his link with Islamists when France was fighting the same Islamists in Mali). African forces meant to help restore peace were said to have different agendas. Thus Chadians were believed to protect the Seleka (among which are nationals of their country) while soldiers from Congo-Brazzaville and Burundi feel closer to the Christian populations, to the extent that an exchange of fire took place between Burundian “peacekeepers” and their Chadian counterparts in Bangui. The tension was such that ultimately it was decided that Chadians had to be relocated to the north of the country (Colette Braeckman, Le Soir, 28 December 2013).

Worried that the crisis could spill over into the DRC (like it was with Rwanda in 1994, in fact the DRC has already welcomed thousands of refugees from CAR, which shares a long but porous border with CAR), Kinshasa announced the deployment of 850 troops in Central Africa to secure the border. Curiously, Rwanda, which is at war with the DRC, also announced that it would provide a contingent of 800 men to the African Union (apparently Rwandan troops are going to hunt the Hutu ‘genocidists’ allegedly hiding in CAR).

More than 1,000 people have killed in a matter of days in the first weeks of 2014 and the U.N. children’s agency UNICEF says that two children were beheaded, and that “unprecedented levels of violence” are being carried out on children. An estimated 935,000 people have been uprooted throughout the country (AP, 13 January 2014). 150,000 internally displaced people remain crammed for months now in makeshifts at Mpoko International Airport.

France was determined to ‘correct the mistake’ it made by backing Michel Djotodia. Since French troops’ relations with interim President Michel Djotodia deteriorated to hate level, there was no way he could continue to preside over the country. He quickly became a liability.

Both interim President Djotodia and Transitional Prime Minister Nicolas Tiangaye were forced to resign on 9 January 2014 at an extraordinary summit of leaders of the Economic Community of Central African States (CEEAC, by its French acronym) gathered in Ndjamena, the capital of Chad, at the initiative of Chadian President Idriss Déby Itno (the main backer of Djotodia). Deby had understood that France did not want Djotodia anymore.

According to Agence France Presse (AFP), Djotodia was accused by “the international community” (read France) of passivity towards the sectarian violence that has turned to mass killings. A total paralysis of Bangui also alerted CAR’s neighboring countries. France, which wanted the departure of Djotodia (he has now started a long exile in Benin) asked the National Transitional Council (NTC interim parliament) – composed of 135 members appointed after the takeover by Mr Djotodia, from different political parties, the Seleka movement, civil society and public institutions – to chose a new transitional president as soon as possible.

### **France Still Calling the Shots in CAR**

For the time being, CAR has “an acting transitional president of the republic” Alexander Ferdinand Nguendet, the current National Transitional Council President. Mr. Nguendet has already pledged that the election would take place “under such conditions” as stipulated by the Transitional Charter. So far, violence continues unabated and tension remains high.

The newly elected transitional leader will have the difficult task of pacifying the country, a totally paralyzed administration and allowing hundreds of thousands of displaced people to return to their homes. France has also indicated that it wished that general elections be held “before the end of 2014.” We suppose that all mining contracts Djotodia signed with whoever will probably be cancelled. It is France who is calling the shots. Not surprised! How independent are African countries? New Year, new wars in Africa. Even South Sudan, Africa’s youngest country, has not escaped from the road most travelled by its older siblings. The truth is that every ‘resource war’ in Africa has hidden hands pulling the strings behind it.

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