

Militarization and Neo-Colonial Intrigue in the Central African Republic

The Struggle for Sovereignty and Unity

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Recent events in the Central African Republic provides a test-case for the future of the continent and the role of imperialist governments in their ongoing interventions into the internal affairs of various nation-states. Threatened with a rebel alliance, known as Seleka, the regime of President Francois Bozize has been making an effort to remain in power by requesting the assistance of France as well as regional states in and around central Africa.

Bozize's government has enjoyed French support for many years. A former colony of Paris, the country of 4.4 million is rich with mineral resources that have not been effectively utilized for the benefit of the majority of people inside country.

As rebel forces have taken several cities and rural areas in the north of the CAR, President Bozize has refused to leave office as a pre-condition for peace talks with Seleka. The ruling "Kwa Na Kwa" (KNK) party (Sango for "Work, only Work) led by Bozize, announced on January 3 that the president's resignation was unacceptable.

CAR government spokesman, Cyriac Gonda, told the international press that "The question of President Bozize leaving...will be rejected systematically if it is proposed. For us, the solution is to form a unity government with everyone." (Reuters, January 3)

In contrast a representative of the Convention of Patriots for Justice and Peace, an affiliate of Seleka, said that no peace deal would be possible without the president leaving office. Reports from inside the country say that rebel groups are within 45 miles of the capital of Bangui.

An opposition leader and former Prime Minister, Martin Ziguele, said on January 3 that the issue of Bozize leaving office should be placed on the table at peace talks in Libreville, Gabon. "There will be no taboo subjects in Libreville, all options will be on the table," Ziguele stressed.

Regional Involvement and Imperialist Interventions

In December Bozize made an appeal to the former colonial power of France to assist the government in halting the rebel advances. France responded by deploying additional troops in order to protect its personnel in the country but has refused to supply military forces to attack the Seleka rebels.

France had intervened in December 2006 with air power to prevent a previous attack on the

Bozize government. The country has witnessed numerous episodes of civil war and military coups since it won independence in 1960.

At the same time regional leaders in Africa have provided troops in support of Bozize's government. These states include Chad, Gabon, Cameroon and Angola.

Gabonese Gen. Jean-Felix Akaga is in charge of the regional force operating under the Economic Community of Central African States (CEEAC). According to Akaga, "If the rebels attack Damara, it's a declaration of war. Damara is the red line that the rebels cannot cross."

Bozize, a former military officer, came to power in a coup in March 2003. Although Bozize said initially that he would not run for office, by 2005 the KNK had been established by a coalition of small political parties, business leaders and civic groups that selected Bozize as their candidate for president.

In the elections held on March 13 and May 8 of 2005, Bozize won 43 percent of the vote in the first round and 64.6 percent in the runoff. The KNK party won 42 out of 105 seats in the National Assembly.

The KNK has described itself as a social democratic party without theories. In a statement from Bozize, he said that "The Kwa Na Kwa is a working person's party in the tradition of Social Democracy. Its objective is to mobilize the population, raise awareness, and move towards development, in the sense of the fight against poverty: through work."

Bozize continued noting that "It is only through work that we can change the situation we face in this country. The Kwa Na Kwa is a tool to combat idleness, laziness and laxity. It is a party different from others in the sense that this is not a party of theories."

The KNK party claims to be in alliance with the founder of the CAR, Bethelmy Boganda. Boganda advocated the necessity of the government to house, feed, educate, heal and clothe the people.

The opposition rebel forces are largely based in the north of the country. They say their grievances stem from the failure of the KNK to honor an agreement signed with them in 2007 and 2011 that mandated financial assistance to the dissidents.

The Seleka group consists of several parties including the Union of Democratic Forces for Unity, the Wa Kodro Salute Patriotic Convention and the Convention of Patriots for Justice and Peace. The fighters inside the rebel coalition are veterans of previous rebel movements and mutineers from the national army of the CAR.

It is estimated that Seleka has up to 2,000 members while the CAR military has a standing force of 3,500. Two leading figures inside the rebel coalition are Michel Djotodia, the president and Eric Neris Massi, the son of Charles Massi, a former minister in the Bozize administration.

France has maintained a permanent presence in the country since its independence in 1960. The United States deployed Special Forces to the country in October 2011 ostensibly on a mission to track down remnants of the formerly Ugandan-based Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).

Mineral Resources Underline Western Involvement

The CAR is known for its wealth in mineral resources. This state is well-endowed with copper, diamonds, gold, graphite, ilmenite, iron ore, kyanite, lignite, limestone, manganese, monazite, quartz, rutile, salt, tin and uranium.

Although the country is host to these resources the sale of which only constitute approximately 7 percent of its gross domestic product, mainly in the diamond and gold sectors. The gold and diamond production mostly comes from the regions of Berberati, Haute-Kotto and Haute-Sangha.

In 2010, the CAR was ranked 14th among the world's producers of rough diamonds by volume and 12th in regard to value. Mining firms from Canada, South Africa and the U.S. are cited as being involved in the exploitation of these resources.

According to a survey conducted by Yadira Soto-Viruet in 2010, "CAR's exports to the United States were valued at about \$5.6 million in 2010 compared with about \$3.4 million in 2009; rough diamonds accounted for \$3.3 million of these exports. Imports from the United States were valued at about \$10.3 million in 2010 compared with about \$31.4 million in 2009. This total included nearly \$2.7 million for drilling and oilfield equipment and \$12,000 for excavating machinery." (The Mineral Industries of Central African Republic, Ivory Coast and Togo)

African states must resolve the conflict inside the CAR in order to avoid further French and U.S. military involvement. The country typifies the crisis facing modern African nations which are resource rich but lack the internal cohesiveness and ideological orientation that could foster progress and national unity.

If the talks in Libreville fail to bring into existence a government of national unity in the CAR, the consequences will be disastrous for the people. Prospects for a national unity accord could embolden governments in central Africa to move forward with greater cooperation in the areas of economic and political development.

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