



ERASED IDENTITY:

**MUSLIMS IN ETHNICALLY-
CLEANSED AREAS OF THE
CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC**

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Cover photo: The grave of the former head of the Muslim community in Gadzi, killed by anti-balaka on 12 February 2015 ©Amnesty International

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SUMMARY

“We had no choice but to join the Catholic Church. The anti-balaka swore they’d kill us if we didn’t.”

- A 23-year-old former Muslim in Sangha-Mbaéré prefecture.

In a broad swathe of the Central African Republic (CAR)—roughly the western third of the country—the country’s Muslim minority has largely disappeared. The site of a violent wave of ethnic cleansing in early 2014, this region still very much suffers from its consequences. While a few towns have Muslim enclaves protected by international peacekeeping forces, many towns and villages that were previously home to substantial Muslim communities are now empty of their Muslim inhabitants. Mosques have been left badly damaged or destroyed, and the Muslim call to prayer, once a familiar sound, is no longer heard.

Yet this sombre picture masks a somewhat more complex reality. Notwithstanding the near-invisibility of the Muslim presence, a small number of Muslims have quietly returned to their home communities. On a recent visit to three western provinces in the Central African Republic, Amnesty International delegates visited 12 towns and villages where Muslims are now living, and learned of several more. Some locales have only a handful of Muslim inhabitants, but others have more than 50.

The biggest challenge these small Muslim communities face is the lack of security. The armed anti-balaka militia that violently expelled tens of thousands of Muslims from the country last year continue to hold significant power. The Muslim communities that remain must, implicitly or explicitly, negotiate the terms of their existence with these anti-balaka power-holders.

The cost of survival for Muslims in these areas is high. In some places, anti-balaka militia have forcibly converted Muslims to Christianity, or have put Muslims under intense pressure to convert. Elsewhere in this region, except some towns in which UN peacekeepers are stationed, Muslims are effectively barred from practicing or manifesting their religion in public. To the extent that their presence in this part of the country is tolerated by anti-balaka militia, it is based on the understanding that they cannot publicly assert their Muslim identity or belief in Islam. This means that they cannot pray (except in secret); they cannot wear traditional Muslim clothing, and—in contrast to a few recent initiatives in Carnot and

Bangui—they cannot rebuild their mosques. Often they dare not even speak their preferred language within hearing range of others. Although members of the larger community may be aware that they are Muslim, their religion has been made invisible.

Religious affiliation, to be sure, is not the only element. Notably, the anti-balaka militia's tolerance for the presence of Muslims tends to vary considerably depending on the Muslims' ethnicity/nationality, as well as their kinship or other links to the Christian community. Muslims belonging to ethnic groups that are deemed indigenous—such as the Gbaya—are much more likely to be allowed to remain than Muslims from other groups. In contrast, Muslims who are viewed as Chadian or Sudanese—who either themselves immigrated to the Central African Republic from Chad or Sudan, or who had parents or grandparents who did so—are more often considered the enemy.

“The Arabs will never be allowed to return,” one Muslim told Amnesty International, speaking of people of Chadian and Sudanese descent. “For the anti-balaka, they are indelibly linked to the Seleka.”¹

More than 30,000 Muslims currently lead restricted lives in protected enclaves within the Central African Republic, while many tens of thousands of others have been made refugees abroad. The beleaguered Muslim communities existing without protection in western CAR are relatively small in comparison—probably fewer than 500 people in all—but their significance is disproportionate to their size. The extent to which their security and freedom of religion is protected will be an important bellwether to understand whether, when, and under what conditions others may be able to return. Much needs to be done.

METHODOLOGY

This briefing paper addresses the situation of Muslims living in the western third of the Central African Republic, the region hit by a violent wave of ethnic cleansing in January to March 2014.² In other words, it covers roughly the region between, on the one hand, the towns of Damara, Sibut, and Kaga Bandoro, and on the other, the Cameroonian border, examining the conditions that prevail in small towns and villages where international

¹ Amnesty International interview, Boda, 6 May 2015.

² As defined by a UN Commission of Experts, ethnic cleansing is a “purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas ... This purpose appears to be the occupation of territory to the exclusion of the purged group or groups.” Report of the United Nations Commission of Experts Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 780 (1992), 27 May 1994. Numerous experts have concluded that anti-balaka militia have carried out ethnic cleansing in the Central African Republic. Notably, the International Commission of Inquiry on the Central African Republic found “repeated instances of crimes against humanity amounting to the fact pattern of ethnic cleansing committed by the anti-balaka in the areas in which Muslims had been living.” Final Report of the International Commission of Inquiry on the Central African Republic, UN Doc. S/2014/928, 22 December 2014, p. 96.

peacekeepers are not stationed.

Within this broad region, the paper focuses primarily on the situation of Muslims living in Mamberé Kadeï, Lobaye, and Sangha-Mbaéré prefectures, which Amnesty International delegates visited in November 2014 and May 2015, but it also includes information from other areas. In their 2014 and 2015 visits to the country, Amnesty International delegates also visited Ombella-M'poko, Ouaka, Kemo-Gribingui, and Ouham prefectures. It is largely based on in-person interviews with more than 60 Muslims in these areas, supplemented by telephone interviews with dozens of others. Some of the Muslims who were interviewed are now living in protected enclaves, but most of them are living in their home communities. Interviews, which were generally conducted individually, were done with as much privacy as possible, and interviewers sought to compare and corroborate testimonies. All names of people cited in this document have been changed to protect identities.

Amnesty International also interviewed local government officials, religious authorities, UN officials, and representatives of nongovernmental organizations, as well as members of the Christian majority in areas in which Muslims were living. More than 85 people were interviewed in all.

BACKGROUND

The wanton violence of Seleka forces, who took power via a coup d'état in late March 2013, generated enormous anger and resentment. Perceived by many Central Africans as foreigners—as Chadians and Sudanese—and as favouring members of the country's Muslim minority, the Seleka carried out widespread human rights violations, including torture, sexual violence, extrajudicial executions, and enforced disappearances.

Groups of largely Christian and animist anti-balaka militia, supported and to some extent led by members of the former armed forces loyal to former president Francois Bozize, organized to fight the Seleka. In September 2013, they started attacking Muslim communities, supposedly in retaliation for Seleka violence against non-Muslims.³ Seleka and anti-balaka attacks on civilians escalated dramatically in December 2013, as sectarian hostility reached a fever pitch. French and African Union (AU) troops that were deployed to the country in December limited the power of the Seleka, but did not stop the anti-balaka's depredations.⁴

³ The formal dismantling of the Seleka in September 2013 had no meaningful impact on their activities. For simplicity's sake, Amnesty International will refer to them as the Seleka (rather than the "ex-Seleka") in this briefing.

⁴ A small peacekeeping force, initially known as the Mission for the Consolidation of Peace in Central African Republic (MICOPAX, its initials in French), or the Multinational Force of the States of Central Africa (FOMAC, its initials in French), was first authorised in 2010 under the auspices of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS). In mid-December 2013, the force was reconstituted and

Then-President Michel Djotodia resigned on 10 January 2014 following intense international pressure. Immediately after he left office, Seleka forces began withdrawing from the west of the country, retreating to their strongholds north and east of Bangui. The power vacuum left in their wake was filled by predatory anti-balaka militia, which unleashed a violent wave of ethnic cleansing aimed at forcing Muslims to leave the country.⁵ Thousands of Muslims were killed, and many tens of thousands fled.⁶

International peacekeepers, first under the auspices of the AU and then the United Nations (UN), helped stabilize the country but did not fully restore security.⁷ Even now, anti-balaka militia wield considerable power in areas from which Seleka forces have withdrawn. The CAR government has yet to reestablish its authority across the country. International military forces are stretched thin, and according to multiple sources, many of them are seen more often in their barracks than carrying out patrols. Local government and religious authorities in several more remote areas told Amnesty International that they had rarely seen peacekeepers over the past year.

INSECURITY AND TARGETING OF MUSLIMS

CONTINUING VIOLENCE AND LACK OF PROTECTION

During the period of violent ethnic cleansing in early 2014, some Muslims gathered for safety in enclaves protected by international peacekeeping forces; most of those enclaves still exist. At present, over 30,000 Muslims live in seven enclaves located in western CAR (PK5 in Bangui, Boda, Yaloke, Carnot, Berberati, Bouar and Dekoa), where they continue to be

put under the auspices of the African Union. Called the International Support Mission to the Central African Republic (MISCA, its initials in French), its size was expanded substantially. Earlier that same month, a French force known as Sangaris, initially made up of several hundred troops, was also deployed to the Central African Republic.

⁵ Amnesty International, Ethnic cleansing and sectarian killings in the Central African Republic, AFR19/004/2014, February 2014.

⁶ See Krista Larson, "More than 5,000 dead in Central African Republic," Associated Press, 12 September 2014; Final Report of the International Commission of Inquiry on the Central African Republic, UN Doc. S/2014/928, 22 December 2014, pp. 19 and 127.

⁷ On 15 September 2014, the AU force was re-hatted, expanding in size and becoming part of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA). With a mandated strength of 10,750 military troops and 2,120 police, MINUSCA now has approximately 8,300 military troops and 1,500 police. United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic, MINUSCA Facts and Figures, 31 March 2015.

protected by international peacekeeping forces.⁸

Outside of Bangui, which hosts a large number of peacekeeping troops, and towns in which peacekeeping troops are based, Muslims in western CAR have little or no protection from armed anti-balaka militia and other so-called self-defense forces. If Muslims are able to remain in their villages and towns, it is because the local community, and the armed militia in particular, allow them to. Some of the Muslims whom Amnesty International interviewed said that they were “protected” by local anti-balaka militia; indeed, some had paid considerable sums to ensure such protection. Others had Christian family members—cousins and in-laws—who lobbied on their behalf with members of armed groups.

Nearly all of the Muslims that Amnesty International interviewed fled into the bush when the first anti-balaka attacks on their villages occurred. Some spent several days in the bush before returning home; others spent weeks or even months there.

“My whole family fled the moment the first anti-balaka arrived,” recalled Moussa J., from Guen, whose father was a Muslim convert and whose mother was Christian.⁹ “We spent two weeks in the bush, were captured and taken hostage by the anti-balaka, and then were able to return home after my cousin negotiated on our behalf. We paid the anti-balaka 50,000 CFA to not be killed.”¹⁰ The anti-balaka militia that had come to Guen in February 2014 had already killed more than 70 Muslims during a few days of slaughter.¹¹

Even after his release, Moussa J. and his family faced continuing death threats and harassment. “We had to pay the anti-balaka again and again. Finally we didn’t have any more money. My Christian relatives like me a lot and kept negotiating with the anti-balaka to save me.”

The intensity of the violence in western CAR tapered off in March 2014 and, over the past year, the security situation has improved incrementally. But Muslims who have risked

⁸ There is considerable variation among the enclaves in terms of size, conditions, etc. The PK5 enclave is several square kilometres and hosts over 20,000 people; the Boda enclave, as well, hosts many thousands. The others are smaller both in size and in population. The Carnot and Berberati enclaves, for example, both in Catholic Church compounds, host only a few hundred people each; Bouar hosts 1,600; Dekoa has only 70. UNHCR, CAR Operational Update, April-May 2015.

There is also a group of Muslims living at the MINUSCA camp in Mbaiki (the capital of Lobaye prefecture in the southwest), which once amounted to over 60 people. Over time, however, most of the Muslims in Mbaiki left the MINUSCA camp to live in the community; only about a dozen now remain within the camp itself. Amnesty International interviews, Mbaiki, 6 May 2015. It is worth noting that, for Muslims, living in a town with a MINUSCA presence is much safer than living in a town that does not have peacekeepers stationed. Yet most of the towns and villages where small groups of Muslims are living have no peacekeeping presence, and few visits from peacekeepers.

⁹ Amnesty International interview, Guen, 12 May 2015.

¹⁰ 50,000 CFA is equivalent to approximately US \$84.

¹¹ Human Rights Watch, Massacres in Remote Villages, 3 April 2014.

remaining in the region are still extremely vulnerable. A few have been killed, and many others have had to flee, even recently.

“The anti-balaka killed my husband,” said Fatima A., whose spouse was killed in Gadzi, Mambéré Kadeï prefecture, on 12 February 2015.¹² Earlier, in approximately October 2014, her brother was killed by the same group.

Five anti-balaka fighters arrived at Fatima’s door at 4 am on the night that they killed her husband, a baker who was considered the head of the Hausa community in Gadzi. They shot her husband right in front of her and left his body, which the family buried just outside the family compound. Because there are no police in Gadzi, the murder was never investigated.

The anti-balaka who killed Fatima’s husband also sought to kill her sister’s husband, Adama A., age 64, who was living with the family in Gadzi. He managed to escape the night his brother-in-law was killed, but had to hide inside the family compound for two weeks, until MINUSCA troops visited the village and took him away. When Amnesty International interviewed Fatima in May, she and the other members of her family were still unsure whether they, too, should flee. For the time being they had decided to stay in Gadzi until harvest season, but to send their children to the Muslim enclave in Carnot.

Peuhl herding communities in the region have faced particular challenges, losing their animals and, in some cases, being trapped in remote villages.¹³ Amnesty International interviewed five Peuhl herders whom MINUSCA troops had rescued from small villages in Ombella-M’Poko and Mambéré-Kadeï prefectures and brought to the Muslim enclave in Yaloke in April and May 2015.¹⁴ All of them had endured great danger and hardship, particularly during the first months of 2014, and all of them had no freedom of movement outside of the villages in which they had been living.¹⁵ It was clear, however, that the relationship of the herders with the majority communities and anti-balaka militia in those villages varied substantially. While some had essentially been held hostage and badly abused, others felt that they had been protected by people who were their friends.¹⁶

¹² Amnesty International interview, Gadzi, 11 May 2015.

¹³ See Human Rights Watch, Central African Republic: Muslims Trapped in Enclaves, 22 December 2014; Human Rights Watch, Central African Republic: Muslims Held Captive, Raped, 22 April 2015.

¹⁴ The commander of the Bangladeshi troops that belong to the MINUSCA contingent told Amnesty International that his forces has carried out four operations to bring Muslims to Yaloke, transferring a total of 79 Muslims from villages such as Lambi, Pondo, and Mbaina. Amnesty International interview with Maj. Jashimuddin, Bossembele, 15 May 2015. UNHCR put the number at 91. UNHCR, Operational Update, Central African Republic, April-May 2015.

¹⁵ They all told dramatic stories of escaping death during the period of intense ethnic cleansing, in early 2014. Amnesty International interviews, Yaloke, 16 May 2015.

¹⁶ See Human Rights Watch, Central African Republic: Muslims Held Captive, Raped, 22 April 2015 (describing rape, killings). Attesting to the complexity of the situations, however, not all of the Muslims living in these villages wanted to leave. After UN staff interviewed people individually, some of them

THE ROLE OF ETHNICITY, FAMILY TIES, AND NATIONAL DESCENT

Amnesty International found that Muslims' ethnicity, family background, and national descent have a significant impact on their ability to remain, with any modicum of security, in their home towns and villages. Members of some ethnic and national groups are viewed relatively favourably, while others still face intense hostility.

Moussa J., from Guen, described how his ethnic makeup played an important role in his and his family's release when he was held hostage by the anti-balaka last year. "People knew that my mother was a Central African Christian, a Gbaya. 'We can't kill him,' they said."¹⁷

Amnesty International found that a significant proportion of the Muslims who were able to remain in their home towns and villages were those whose mothers were local Christians—and who were therefore deemed less "foreign" than other Muslims. Muslims of Malian and Senegalese descent, too, seemed to be more readily accepted than those from other groups, having been viewed as relatively neutral during the Seleka era.¹⁸ In contrast, Muslims of Chadian and Sudanese descent were widely viewed as complicit in Seleka abuses, as were, to a lesser extent, Mbororo herders.¹⁹ As a result of this commonly shared view, and of the collective guilt attributed to the Chadian, Sudanese and Mbororo communities, they face much more substantial obstacles to reintegration.

"Never!" said a prominent Christian businessman in Gadzi who was asked when Muslims of Chadian or Sudanese descent could return there.²⁰ Many others said the same thing with the same vehemence; in fact, even other Muslims affirmed that prospects for the return of people

chose to stay behind. Amnesty International interview with UNHCR representative, Bangui, 18 May 2015. Several Muslims remained in the villages of Donboro, Zaoroyanga, and Mbaina, for example, even though MINUSCA had offered to transport them safely to Yaloke. And one of the Christians who lived in Zaoroyanga was so concerned for the safety of a Muslim man who had decided to leave (someone who left for economic reasons) that he accompanied his Muslim friend all the way to Yaloke. "He lodged me at his home; he fed me; he gave me everything," the other man recalled with fondness. Amnesty International interview, Yaloke, 16 May 2015.

¹⁷ Amnesty International interview, Guen, 12 May 2015.

¹⁸ This discrimination among ethnic groups was even evident during the period of intense ethnic cleansing in 2014. Although all Muslims were in serious danger, Malian and Senegalese Muslims were less of a target than Chadian and Sudanese Muslims. In the town of Bouguere, for example, where scores of Muslims were killed on 10 February 2014, the anti-balaka militias responsible for the massacre allowed an enormous truck full of Malians to escape. But when they found a young man whom they deemed Arab on the truck, they pulled him out and killed him.

¹⁹ A note on terminology: the terms Peulh and Mbororo are to some extent interchangeable, referring to traditionally nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists (other terms for members of this ethnic group are Fulani and Fulbé). Some Peulh are no longer pastoralists, however; they are often merchants, and some of them describe themselves as sedentary Peulh. Hostility toward the Peulh in CAR tends to focus on Peulh herders, for whom the specific term Mbororo is often used.

²⁰ Amnesty International interview, Gadzi, 11 May 2015.

of Chadian or Sudanese descent to these rural areas were bleak.²¹

Muslims' ethnicity and appearance—whether they are distinguishable as Muslims—also greatly affects their freedom of movement. Muslims who look like other members of the community, rather than distinctly Arab or Peulh, are much freer to travel around the country.²²

VIOLATIONS OF THE RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF RELIGION

Outside of a few protected enclaves (and to a lesser extent, parts of Bangui), the lack of security in the broad area of western CAR that Amnesty International examined has left Muslims with no freedom to practice or manifest their religion in public. To the extent that their presence is tolerated by anti-balaka militia, they cannot openly display their Muslim identity or belief in Islam. They are barred from praying (except secretly); they cannot wear traditional Muslim clothing such as djellabas (boubous), and they cannot rebuild their mosques.

These restrictions are unconscionable and unjustifiable. The Central African Republic has an obligation, under international law, to respect and protect the rights to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the right to practice one's religion openly and without arbitrary interference.²³

²¹ Amnesty International interviews in numerous towns and villages in western CAR, November 2014 and May 2015.

²² Amnesty International interviews in numerous towns and villages in western CAR, November 2014 and May 2015.

²³ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), art. 18; see also Universal Declaration of Human Rights, art. 9, and the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights, art. 8. The fact that these restrictions are imposed by anti-balaka militia rather than the CAR government directly does not absolve the state of its responsibility, as the government has a duty to ensure that individuals can exercise their human rights, including freedom of religion, without discrimination. See Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, G.A. res. 36/55, UN Doc. A/36/684 (1981), art. 4 (providing that "States shall take effective measures to prevent and eliminate discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief in the recognition, exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms in all fields of civil, economic, political, social and cultural life.")

FORCED CONVERSIONS TO CHRISTIANITY

In at least five towns and villages in western CAR, Muslims have converted to Christianity under threat of death, or under other coercion. Their numbers are small—dozens not hundreds—but the problem is extremely serious. It is indicative of a striking and unjustifiable intolerance to Muslim religious practice.

Omaru F., a diamond miner, described the forced conversion of some 10 people in Bania village, in Mamberé Kadeï prefecture.²⁴ He said that anti-balaka militia from the towns of Carnot and Bouar attacked Bania in February 2014, killing two elderly Muslim leaders and causing the village's remaining Muslims to flee into the forest, hiding in small groups.²⁵ After a couple of weeks, he said, the village headman and a Protestant pastor came into the forest to inform the Muslims that if they did not return, the anti-balaka militia would chase them down and kill them. But in order to return, they would have to convert to Christianity.

After the Muslims were baptised into the Apostolic Church in a ceremony attended by the village headman, they “had to show the anti-balaka [their] baptismal cards to not be killed,” Omaru said. Although Omaru had been baptised, he said that he did not accept the Christian religion in his heart, and that continuing religious harassment led him to flee to Berberati a few months later. Muslims in Bania told Amnesty International in May 2015 that the situation had since improved somewhat, but that they still faced sporadic threats from anti-balaka militias coming from other villages, and that several had remained Christian for reasons of security.²⁶

Muslims in a medium-sized town in Bambio subprefecture, Sangha-Mbaéré prefecture, told a similar story.²⁷ Until 2014, more than 120 Muslims lived in the town, which was a vibrant trading centre. When the anti-balaka attacked the area, however, nearly the entire Muslim community fled. Now four brothers and three sisters, ranging in age from 15 to 23, are the only members of the community who remain.

The siblings were born in the Central African Republic, as was their father (their grandfather on their father's side was born in Chad). Yet they were only able to stay in the town when the other Muslims left because their mother was Christian, and because they had numerous Christian cousins who hid them and protected them. And although they were allowed to remain, they were forcibly converted to Catholicism.

²⁴ Amnesty International interview, Berberati, 10 May 2015.

²⁵ According to several sources from Bania, the anti-balaka killed Souleiman, age about 75, the head of the Muslim community, and Mamaïssa (or Mahamat), age about 90, a former imam. The majority of Bania's Muslims had fled before the anti-balaka arrived. Amnesty International interview, Bania, 8 May 2015.

²⁶ Muslims in Bania said that local anti-balaka were relatively tolerant—even, on occasion, protective—but that anti-balaka who came from elsewhere were considerably more dangerous. Amnesty International interviews, Bania, 8 May 2015.

²⁷ Amnesty International is withholding the name of the town to protect its sources from reprisals.

“We had no choice but to join the Catholic Church,” the oldest brother told Amnesty International. “The anti-balaka swore they’d kill us if we didn’t.” Another brother said that the family members have to attend church services every Sunday. “We have to confirm that we’re really Catholic,” he explained.²⁸

In Bambio, in Sangha-Mbaéré prefecture, an extended family of Muslims stayed when others fled, but at the cost of changing their religion. “The anti-balaka told us to go to church,” recalled Abdoulaye A. “‘If you don’t want to, we’ll kill you,’ they told us.”²⁹

Similarly, in Guen, a small town in Mambéré-Kadeï prefecture, several Muslims have converted to Christianity. Anti-balaka militia summarily killed scores of Muslims there in February 2014, and they continue to exercise substantial power in the area.³⁰

“There’s enormous pressure to convert to Christianity,” said Adum Y., a farmer in Guen. “I know at least eight people who have converted. But there is only one God, so I’m not going to convert: I’m Muslim and I will always be Muslim.” Adum said that some of the converts were people who had previously converted to Islam from Christianity, and had now converted back.³¹

Forced conversions were also reported in Balego and Boyballé villages, in Mambéré Kadeï prefecture. One man said that he was not threatened with violence to convert, but that he was penalized financially for refusing to do so. “If you refuse to be baptised you have to pay a fine,” said Hassan I., age 61, who lived in Balego until recently.³²

In some villages in which there is considerable pressure to convert, some Muslims have taken the risk of remaining Muslim, while others, too fearful, have changed their religion. Jean-Bosco N., a farmer in Zalingo, Lobaye prefecture, told Amnesty International that he became a Muslim in 1978, but that in 2014 he converted back to Christianity. He joined a Baptist church because he was afraid of the anti-balaka militia that were carrying out attacks in the area, killing several Muslims and destroying two mosques. Dozens of others in Zalingo, including the wife of a man who was killed, continue to consider themselves Muslim.

²⁸ Amnesty International interview, 7 May 2015.

²⁹ Amnesty International interview, Bambio, 9 May 2015.

³⁰ Anti-balaka militia killed at least 72 Muslims in Guen in early February 2014. See Krista Larson, “70 Muslims killed in Central African Republic town,” Associated Press, 24 February 2014; Human Rights Watch, *Massacres in Remote Villages*, 3 April 2014. Amnesty International interviewed several inhabitants of Guen, including two neighborhood headmen (chefs du quartier), who said that armed anti-balaka fighters still hold effective power in the town, and profit from the diamond mining carried out in the area. Amnesty International interviews, Guen, 12 May 2015.

³¹ Amnesty International interview, Guen, 12 May 2015.

³² Amnesty International interview, Berberati, 10 May 2015.

BANS ON PRAYER AND OTHER FORMS OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

De facto bans on Muslim prayer are ubiquitous. “We can only pray at home, alone, in secret,” said Ali I., in Bania village³³—a description repeated by dozens of other Muslims whom Amnesty International interviewed.

“It is effectively illegal for us to pray,” said Abdou Y., in Mbaiki. “We have to hide, do it quickly, and do it by ourselves. Collective Friday prayers are impossible.”³⁴ Some Muslims said that they were afraid even to pray at home, because if someone saw them they would face trouble.³⁵

Muslims interviewed also said that because of threats they were unable to celebrate Ramadan or other religious holidays. Many expressed tremendous anguish over these prohibitions, feeling that key tenets of their religion were being violated.

OTHER RESTRICTIONS ON MUSLIM IDENTITY

Muslims whom Amnesty International interviewed described other restrictions on the assertion of their Muslim identity. For example, Muslim inhabitants of several villages said that they were not allowed to speak the Fulbe language—the language spoken by members of the Muslim Peulh ethnic group.³⁶ Instead, they were supposed to speak Sango, the country’s national language, or Gbaya, the language of the country’s largest ethnic group. These informal restrictions were enforced by anti-balaka militias with the apparent support of the larger community.

“They threatened to kill me if I didn’t speak Gbaya,” said a young Muslim man from Guen who was held hostage for a week by anti-balaka militia in February 2014. “I did my best to speak it, even though I’ve never learned it.”³⁷

The pressure on Muslims to remain invisible extends to clothing. Prior to 2014, many Muslim men were identifiable by their brimless Muslim caps and, in some cases, flowing djellabas, and women could be distinguished by their headscarves. Now, outside of the protected enclaves, wearing such traditional Muslim clothing is difficult if not impossible—except for people who are not Muslim.

“If you see anyone wearing Muslim clothing, you can expect he’s an anti-balaka,” said Adum

³³ Amnesty International interview, Bania, 8 May 2015.

³⁴ Amnesty International interview, Mbaiki, 1 November 2014.

³⁵ They also lack prayer rugs, having lost them when their homes were looted. “I put a sack on the floor to pray,” one man explained. Amnesty International interview, Guen, 12 May 2015.

³⁶ Amnesty International interviews in Guen, Bambio, Boboua, Gadzi, and Boudjala, November 2014 and May 2015.

³⁷ Amnesty International interview, Guen, 11 May 2015.

Y., in Guen. “They’re the ones who looted everyone’s clothing, and now they wear it to humiliate us.”³⁸ On more than one occasion, Amnesty International delegates observed known anti-balaka members wearing traditional Muslim clothing, including high-ranking members dressed in elaborate Muslim robes.

A wealthy Muslim man who lived in Bangui told Amnesty International that in his view the situation in Bangui had improved enough that he could wear a djellaba in the city on occasion, but that he would only visit certain areas that way.³⁹ Other Muslims in Bangui said that when they go out of the PK5 enclave, they take care not to wear distinctive Muslim dress, feeling that to do so might endanger them.

Some Muslims also told Amnesty International that they had taken Christian names, which they used with everyone beyond trusted friends and members of their family. Adum Y., in Guen, said that although he was remaining a Muslim he kept his identity to himself and a few other Muslims.⁴⁰ Elsewhere, a Muslim named Issa changed his name to Jésus.⁴¹

In Bambio, a Muslim who had converted to Christianity said that his Muslim name caused him difficulties, and that he was planning to change it.⁴² He also said that the headman for the neighbourhood in which he lived, known as the Hausa Quarter, was probably going to change the neighbourhood’s name because of pressure from anti-balaka.

The net result of all these restrictions is the erasure of Muslim identity. “We no longer exist as a community,” a woman in Gadzi lamented.⁴³ As another man explained, “we can’t pray together; we can’t meet as a group; we have to lie very, very low.”⁴⁴

DESTROYED MOSQUES

Besides massacres, sectarian killings, and wholesale ethnic cleansing, one of the clearest signs of the intensity of sectarian animus was the destruction of the country’s mosques. In town after town, village after village, mosques were looted, vandalized, damaged or destroyed in early 2014, at the same time that the Muslim population was driven out. Some have

³⁸ Amnesty International interview, Guen, 12 May 2015.

³⁹ Amnesty International interview, Bangui, 18 May 2015. In addition, Amnesty International met a Muslim diamond trader in Carnot who was wearing traditional Muslim robes, but, although he was not in the protected enclave, he was right next door to the MINUSCA base.

⁴⁰ Amnesty International interview, Guen, 12 May 2015.

⁴¹ Amnesty International interview, Mambele, 8 May 2015.

⁴² Amnesty International interview, Bambio, 9 May 2015. The man said that he had been physically threatened on numerous occasions from anti-balaka raiders from the Boda area.

⁴³ Amnesty International interview, Gadzi, 11 May 2015.

⁴⁴ Amnesty International interview, Bania, 8 May 2015.

estimated that more than 400 mosques were destroyed.⁴⁵

Amnesty International has seen partially or wholly destroyed mosques in towns and villages across the Central African Republic, including in Bangui, Yaloké, Bosemptélé, Boali, Boali Poste, Bossembélé, Baoro, Bouar, Zawa, Mbaiki, Boboua, Bomandoro, Boudjoula, Zalingo, Bogueré, Bambio, Mambélé, Balego, Bania, Yamando, Berberati, Carnot, Irmabaro, Zaorosongou, Guen and Gadzi.⁴⁶ Many towns had more than one mosque that was destroyed.⁴⁷ In all, Amnesty International researchers saw over 50 damaged or destroyed mosques during our November 2014 and May 2015 visits to the country.

In the most extreme cases, mosques were reduced to rubble. At present, there is almost no sign of the mosque that once stood on the main road in Bimbo, on the outskirts of Bangui, or of the one formerly in Bangui's Fouh district; only their foundations remain. Many other mosques no longer have roofs, but their walls—though often defaced with anti-Muslim graffiti—still stand. Not a single mosque outside of a few protected enclaves escaped wholesale looting: they all lost Qu'rans and other religious texts, ritual items, prayer rugs, and wooden doors.

Of additional concern, mosques in some areas continue to be attacked. A mosque in Zaorosongou, east of Carnot, was badly damaged by anti-balaka militia in early April 2015. Although all of the Muslims in Zaorosongou had fled the town more than a year earlier, local people said that anti-balaka militia in the area were afraid that the Muslims would return—and destroying the mosque was meant to send a signal to dissuade them from doing so. Similarly, the few remaining Muslim inhabitants of Bania, whose mosque was destroyed in early 2015, reported that by wrecking the mosque the anti-balaka were trying to prevent any other Muslims from coming back.⁴⁸ Muslims in several different areas expressed concern that if progress was made toward bringing the larger Muslim community home, it would provoke further acts of damage and destruction to local mosques.

Outside of Bangui and Carnot, none of the damaged and destroyed mosques have been rebuilt or repaired. In every town and village in western CAR in which Muslims still remain, they emphasized that are not allowed even to contemplate repairing their mosques. Indeed, a woman in Gadzi told Amnesty International that she was verbally threatened by members of the local anti-balaka militia for the mere fact of trying to enter the remains of the town's mosque.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ "US envoy: Nearly every CAR mosque destroyed in war," Al Jazeera, 18 March 2015.

⁴⁶ Amnesty International visited these towns during several trips in 2014 and 2015.

⁴⁷ For example, Mbaiki had three mosques, all of which were looted and damaged. There were previously 11 mosques in Carnot, in Mambéré-Kadeï prefecture; now only one functions.

⁴⁸ Muslims in Bania said that besides sectarian hostility there was a strong economic incentive to preventing large-scale Muslim return: local Christians, including anti-balaka, had taken over all of the expensive houses previously owned by Muslims.

⁴⁹ Amnesty International interview, Gadzi, 11 May 2015.

Except in a few protected enclaves, mosques across western CAR remain largely empty, a silent testament to the destruction of Muslim communities. In a few places, however, they have been converted to new uses. In the town of Balego, not far from Berberati, Amnesty International found a former mosque that was being turned into an evangelical church.⁵⁰ In another town in the same region, a former mosque was being used as the offices of a local association.⁵¹

In a more hopeful development, there are at least two towns in which partially destroyed mosques have been restored to functioning: Bangui and Carnot. The first mosque to be restored was Carnot's Al-Hatab Mosque, one of 11 mosques in the town, all of which had been looted and damaged in late January and early February 2014. Al-Hatab had not been one of the town's most important mosques, but it was chosen for rehabilitation because it was located right next door to the church that was providing protection to threatened Muslims, and which had become the town's ad hoc Muslim enclave.⁵² The mosque reopened for Friday prayers in mid-October 2014.

In Bangui, where some 33 mosques were destroyed, two mosques recently reopened outside of the PK5 Muslim enclave. (There are five mosques inside PK5 that were protected from attack even during the period of intense ethnic cleansing, but all of the mosques outside of the enclave were damaged or destroyed at some point during the violence.) The first mosque to reopen was the Lakouanga Mosque in the 2nd arrondissement, which had been severely damaged in May 2014. The renovations were led by a commission of Christians and Muslims living in the neighbourhood surrounding the mosque, an area with a long history of harmonious inter-communal relations. (The mosque was destroyed in the wake of the April 2014 attack on the Fatima Church by a mob that came from outside the neighbourhood.) Among the donors for the reconstruction effort was the French Embassy.⁵³

The mosque reopened for Friday prayers on 24 April 2015, although with only a flimsy, ad hoc roof. When Amnesty International visited it in late May 2015, construction work was continuing.

"Every Friday since it reopened, there's been an overflowing crowd here," said Issa Nimaga, a member of the mosque's executive committee. "People even pray in the street in front of the mosque."⁵⁴

Kina Mosque, in the 3rd arrondissement, has also reopened for Friday prayers, although it

⁵⁰ Amnesty International visit to Balego, 9 May 2015.

⁵¹ Amnesty International visits to Bambio, 6 November 2015 and 9 May 2015.

⁵² The enclave and the mosque are also right across the street from the base of the MINUSCA peacekeeping troops.

⁵³ French Embassy in Bangui, "A Bangui, l'ambassade de France s'associe à la reconstruction de la Mosquée de Lakouanga," 15 June 2015 (stating that the embassy was providing a total of 10,000 euros of funding to the effort).

⁵⁴ Amnesty International interview, Bangui, 18 May 2015.

consists only of a temporary shelter of wood and waterproof tarpaulins. The imam said that they are planning to build a more permanent structure in the future.⁵⁵

A third mosque, the small and decorative Yapélé Mosque, in the 2nd arrondissement, has been cleaned up in anticipation of rebuilding. A group of Muslims and Christians, including Protestant and Catholic clergy, worked together to remove rubble and dirt from the premises.⁵⁶ The mosque's walls are still standing, and they hope to rebuild the roof soon, despite difficulties in obtaining roofing material in Bangui.

In many areas, it is clear, mosques continue to be an emotional flashpoint for inter-communal relations. On several occasions when an Amnesty International representative took photos of destroyed mosques, local people took the opportunity to vent their feelings about the Muslims who had fled. In Berberati, for example, people in the Poto-Poto neighbourhood, a formerly Muslim area that was badly damaged in early 2014, yelled angrily: "We don't have mosques here; it's Central Africa! We don't need any mosques and we don't need any Muslims!"⁵⁷

OTHER HARDSHIPS

LOSS OF HOUSING

Both the Seleka and the anti-balaka fighters pillaged and destroyed thousands of homes.⁵⁸ When anti-balaka militia forcibly expelled Muslims from much of the country in early 2014, they destroyed their houses both as a means of revenge and to ensure that Muslims would not return. Sometimes rather than destroy a property they took it over as the spoils of war. Formerly Muslim homes continue to be taken over by the local population in some areas, with, in some cases, the alleged complicity of local authorities.⁵⁹ Given their occupation of Muslim homes, some members of the local population have an economic incentive to try to discourage Muslim returns.

Amnesty International found that many Muslims living outside of protected enclaves are squeezed into partially destroyed homes with little or no amenities (such as beds), or are sharing such spaces with other families.

⁵⁵ Amnesty International interview, Bangui, 19 May 2015.

⁵⁶ Amnesty International interviews, Bangui, 18 May 2015.

⁵⁷ Visit to Poto-Poto neighborhood, Berberati, 10 May 2015.

⁵⁸ See, for example, Amnesty International, Ethnic cleansing and sectarian killings in the Central African Republic, AFR19/004/2014, February 2014.

⁵⁹ See Norwegian Refugee Council, Housing, land and property challenges for displaced people, 13 April 2015; Norwegian Refugee Council, Displacement and Housing, Land and Property Rights in the Central African Republic, December 2014.

RESTRICTIONS ON FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT, AND THE ABILITY TO WORK AND EARN A LIVING

Both Muslims in protected enclaves and those living in the broader community face severe limitations on their freedom of movement, which has an extremely negative impact on their ability to work and make money. Many Muslims said that while their local anti-balaka militia knew them and would not bother them, they could not travel safely outside of their local areas.⁶⁰ While most could work in the fields adjacent to their villages with a modicum of security, they could not travel further afield to work and trade in the diamond mines, a common occupation for Muslims prior to the 2014 crisis.

In addition, many businesses and commercial properties that previously belonged to Muslims have been taken over by Christians.

There are some encouraging signs, however. Protected by MINUSCA's presence, Muslims in Carnot, Berberati and Boda (towns in which MINUSCA troops are based) are making incremental though slow progress toward being able to venture out of their enclaves. In Berberati, notably, a group of 92 Muslims just moved out of the Muslim enclave to live in the Poto-Poto neighborhood, the first such move to take place there.⁶¹ In Boda, Muslims are increasing their geographic and social contact with the Christian population, though important tensions still exist.

CONCLUSION

The small groups of Muslims who have reintegrated back into majority-Christian towns and villages in the west of the Central African Republic are a critical bellwether. How they are treated will, for better or worse, have important ramifications for the country's larger Muslim population. If their situation improves—if their basic rights are respected—other Muslims are likely to join them.

The reestablishment of Muslim communities in ethnically-cleansed areas of the Central African Republic is a worthy and important goal. The efforts of Muslims to reintegrate into towns and villages across western CAR should be encouraged and supported by the CAR government, the UN mission to the Central African Republic, and the international

⁶⁰ In western CAR, except in places such as enclaves where they are protected by peacekeepers, Muslims can only stay in their home towns and villages if local anti-balaka fighters accept their presence. In large part, therefore, what Muslims in these areas fear is anti-balaka raiders coming from elsewhere. Amnesty International interviews, numerous towns and villages in western CAR, November 2014 and May 2015.

⁶¹ Bureau des Nations Unies pour la Coopération des Affaires humanitaires, République centrafricaine: Le Coordonnateur humanitaire salue le retour de déplacés vers leurs domiciles à Berberati, 15 July 2015; Amnesty International telephone interview, member of the displaced persons' executive committee, Berberati, 17 July 2015.

community more broadly.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To help ensure that Muslims can live safely in regions from which entire Muslim communities were forcibly expelled in 2014, and can practice their religion openly and without hindrance, Amnesty International makes the following specific recommendations:⁶²

To the government of the Central African Republic:

- In collaboration with UN peacekeeping forces, take prompt and meaningful steps to improve security across the country, to create the conditions necessary for the voluntary, safe and sustainable return of Muslim refugees and those internally displaced to the homes from which they were expelled or fled.
- Initiate investigations into alleged crimes under international law committed in CAR, and provide reparation to victims of such crimes.
- Redouble efforts to reconcile the country's different religious communities, and to help Muslims reintegrate back into the communities from which they were expelled.
- Within the limits of available resources, assist in funding the reconstruction of damaged and destroyed mosques.
- Instruct local authorities such as prefects and subprefects to prioritize reconciliation efforts, including by holding community events to negotiate the safe return of expelled Muslims.
- Within the limits of available resources, work in a fair and transparent manner to rebuild the many houses that were damaged and destroyed in CAR in order to provide shelter to displaced people and returning refugees.
- In a fair and transparent manner, take steps to resolve the property ownership and occupation questions that obstruct Muslims' safe return, to ensure full protection of their right to housing and property, including via the restitution of illegally claimed homes.

To the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), including its peacekeeping forces:

- Take more vigorous action to restore security in all parts of the country and to break the power of irregular militia and armed groups, including the anti-balaka militia that operate in much of western CAR.

⁶² These recommendations are meant to supplement extensive recommendations that Amnesty International has made in past reports regarding the need to combat impunity and ensure accountability for serious crimes. See, in particular, Amnesty International, Central African Republic: Impunity is fuelling violence, AFR 19/011/2014, 11 December 2014; Amnesty International, Central African Republic: Time for accountability, AFR 19/006/2014, 10 July 2014.

- Beyond the protected Muslim enclaves, take cognizance of the existence of groups of Muslims that have returned to their home communities and address their enhanced protection needs.

The United Nations and donor states should:

- Support reconciliation efforts aimed at rebuilding intercommunal bonds, including initiatives that engage threatened pastoralist communities.
- Provide financial support for the reconstruction of damaged and destroyed mosques.
- Provide financial support to efforts to renovate and rebuild the country's housing stock.

ERASED IDENTITY: MUSLIMS IN ETHNICALLY-CLEANSED AREAS OF THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

In the aftermath of the violent wave of ethnic cleansing that swept the western third of the Central African Republic in early 2014, small Muslim communities have quietly returned to their home towns and villages. Because the armed anti-balaka militia that violently expelled tens of thousands of Muslims from the country last year continue to hold significant power, the cost of survival for Muslims in these areas is high.

In some places, anti-balaka militia have forcibly converted Muslims to Christianity, or have put Muslims under intense pressure to convert. Elsewhere, except for areas actively protected by UN peacekeeping forces, Muslim are unable to practice or manifest their religion in public. To the extent that their presence in these areas is tolerated at all by anti-balaka militia, it is based on the understanding that they cannot publicly assert their Muslim identify or belief in Islam.

This means that they cannot pray (except in secret); they cannot wear traditional Muslim clothing, and they cannot rebuild their mosques. Although members of the larger community may be aware that they are Muslim, their religion has been made invisible.

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