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Report

Church Attack in Central African Republic

01 May 2018

Incident

On May 1, 2018, in Bangui, the capital of Central African Republic (CAR), on the outskirts of PK5 district, armed assailants attacked the *Notre Dame de Fatima* Catholic Church with grenades and guns during morning mass where dozens of congregants were in attendance. Initial reports indicate that the attackers killed 15 people including a priest and critically injuring 99 others; subsequent reports have indicated that the number of deaths has since increased to 26. The church attack set-off retaliatory violence in Bangui with attacks on several Mosques, street violence and damaging of United Nations vehicles.



Background

Central African Republic has a history of military coups and ethnic violence. The 2013 wave of violence marked the beginning of the current belligerence when the Muslim Seleka rebels overrun Bangui and seized power from President Francois Bozize. Consequently, a dominantly Christians anti-Balaka armed groups emerged with the intention to oust the Seleka rebel government. These two main rebel groups have splintered into several movements over the time. Some sources put the number of armed groups currently operating in the country at about twenty.

Due to the absence of government influence in the peripheral areas of the country, rebel groups have filled the void and taken control of huge areas of territory including Bocaranga, Ndassima, Yassine and Bria. These are areas rich in mineral resources such as gold and diamonds. Revenue generated from the illicit trade of

these minerals sustains the operations of the armed groups.

The United Nation Security Council authorized deployment of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in CAR (MINUSCA) in April 2014. Its mandate among others was to protect civilians, support the transition process including disarmament, demobilization, reintegration and repatriation process and also facilitate humanitarian assistance. Despite the UN deployment, the security situation in the peripheral areas of the CAR has been deteriorating and is now spreading to the capital Bangui, which has been previously relatively calm. The relative peace enjoyed after the presidential and legislative elections of February 2016, was short-lived as renewed violence emerged; after the withdrawal of French forces later that year.

Threat Assessment

Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) is a terrorist group that has been operating in Central African Republic for a number of years. In April 2017, Uganda and United States, which had deployed troops against LRA, withdrew their forces. A month after their withdrawal there was an upsurge of violence in Bria, Bangassou and Zemio causing huge number of civilian deaths and displacement of the population.

There have been various efforts to secure ceasefire and peace agreements between belligerent armed groups and the government. The June 2017 peace agreement which was signed among various CAR armed groups in Rome, orchestrated by the Catholic Church as part of the mediation process and Ippy ceasefire signed in October 2017 among several armed groups, are notable peace deals which were short-lived as renewed violence surfaced soon after signing.

The national Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) program has also made rather limited progress. The four months pilot DDR program, which was initiated in August 2017, had only 43 combatants from the UPC, anti-Balaka and the FPRC voluntarily disarmed and demobilized.

Three weeks prior to the 10th April Church attack, the MINUSCA and Central African Republic Armed Forces (FACA) jointly conducted a military operation – *Operation Sukula*, in the PK5 district to disarm armed groups operating in the district. The PK5 district is predominately a Muslim neighborhood that borders the church attacked; it is also a residence area to many ex-Seleka rebels. After the joint military operation, 28 people were killed including a Rwandan peacekeeper and several more were wounded, angry demonstrators from the PK5 district took 17 of the dead bodies to MINUSCA headquarters in Bangui to express their discontent.

Indications are that tension is building between MINUSCA and FACA on one hand and the ex-Seleka rebels on the other.

Analysis

The recent attacks further obscure the security situation in Central Africa Republic:

- The assault on the Church could be a direct retaliation for the recent security operation in PK5 neighbourhood. The attack on the Church is likely to ignite a new wave of inter-faith violence not only in Bangui but countrywide;
- As a result of armed groups having control of territory that could finance their operations, it is considered that armed groups would continue to have the capacity to sustain their operations in CAR;
- It is also considered that the withdrawal of Ugandan and United States forces, has created a security vacuum that gives the armed groups freedom of operation.

Comment

Central African Republic has been witnessing a rapidly worsening security and humanitarian situation over the years, undermining the ongoing mediation process and MINUSCA peacekeeping efforts. The number of the armed groups is ever increasing. They are also resorting to criminal activities, which impair stability, peace and development in the local communities. Extended government outreach outside Bangui particularly in mineral rich areas in order to deny rebels control of the areas, could effectively cut illicit financial flow to the rebel groups and subsequently restrict their operations. A robust security sector reform, community-based initiatives to promote resilience need to be incorporated while designing possible solutions for addressing security challenges in Central African Republic.