



STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE ROBERT MENENDEZ (D-NJ)

April 25, 2018

SECURITY AND HUMANITARIAN SITUATION IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN
REPUBLIC

Mr. President I rise to call attention to what has been called the world's most neglected humanitarian crisis, and call upon the Administration to play an active leadership role in helping bring a sustainable peace to the Central African Republic (CAR). Diplomatic attention, especially from the United States, has waned over the past two years. If we fail to commit diplomatic attention to CAR, we risk increasing threats to regional stability, US investments and, most tragically, the lives and livelihoods of millions of Central Africans.

CAR has long been beset by political and social upheaval. Since independence in 1960, the country has endured coups, military mutinies, rebellions, and incursions by the infamous Lord's Resistance Army. The most recent civil war accelerated in 2013 after rebels opposed to the government of François Bozizé took over the capitol. Their campaign to seize the capitol, and the response by resulting self-defense militias were characterized by widespread violence against civilians. France, the European Union, and the African Union all deployed troops to prevent further bloodshed, and in 2014, the UN deployed a peacekeeping mission mandated to protect civilians and prevent further intercommunal fighting. The State Department's Atrocities Prevention Board identified CAR as a country at risk, and the United States took action accordingly, working on the ground to support interventions to prevent mass atrocities.

These vigorous diplomatic actions ushered in a period of relative calm. In the wake of Pope Benedict's visit in 2015 and peaceful elections in 2015-2016, the situation on the ground appeared to stabilize. President Faustin-Archange Touadéra was elected in what was arguably the most competitive contest of any leader in the central Africa region. Donors pledged \$2.2 billion to support stabilization and post-conflict reconstruction in late 2016.

However, in 2017, security in the country began to precipitously decline. Militia and criminal gangs in the north and eastern parts of the country began fighting each other in a quest for control over territory and resources, threatening the fragile peace. Entire villages have been destroyed; civilians targeted and killed. While the government and thirteen armed groups signed a notional peace deal in June 2017—the fifth disarmament agreement signed by armed groups in four years—renewed fighting quickly followed.

Some armed groups have targeted United Nations peacekeepers, a potential war crime under international law. On April 3, members of “anti-Balaka” militias, attacked a United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) base, killing one peacekeeper and injuring 11 others. On April 8, MINUSCA troops came under fire as they were conducting a joint operation with CAR state security forces aimed at disarming and detaining the leaders of what they referred to as “criminal groups” in Bangui's last remaining Muslim enclave, the PK5 neighborhood. Two days later, armed groups levied a sustained attack against a MINUSCA base in downtown Bangui, resulting in the death of one peacekeeper.

The resurgence of militia violence has made CAR one of the most dangerous countries in the world for humanitarian workers, leading aid agencies to reconsider their operations there. Six aid workers were killed in February this year alone, and attacks and threats continue. In November 2017, Doctors Without Borders shut down a major operation after a string of attacks and threats.

Some may ask why the United States should care about what happens in a small landlocked country in Africa with a population of just under 5 million. I give you three reasons.

First, as members of the community of nations we have a moral obligation to take action when we see mass violence and human suffering. United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Stephen O'Brien warned in August 2017 that the renewed clashes were early-warning signs of a possible move towards genocide. While thankfully that scenario has not unfolded, violence continues to play out along ethnic and sectarian lines, causing social profound cleavages. Armed groups of various stripes carry out atrocities, including widespread sexual violence, against innocent civilians. In 2014 largely Christian "anti-Balaka" militia groups, waged a systematic campaign in 2014 forcing most of CAR's Muslim citizens to flee their homes. Many of those Muslim communities remain largely confined to the rebel stronghold of the northeast and small enclaves in the capitol and other population centers. We must do our part to bring this kind of horrific violence to an end. History offers brutal reminders of what happens when the international community fails to intervene on behalf of persecuted minorities.

We must continue to help those in need. The number of internally displaced persons in CAR has increased by more than 70 percent over the past year. Of an estimated total population of 4 million, approximately 681,000 Central Africans are internally displaced—the highest number reported since the height of the conflict in early 2014 -- while an estimated 568,000 more are sheltering as refugees in neighboring countries. Over 87,000 children are at risk of acute malnutrition. Yet the UN has received only 5% of the \$515.6 million it has requested for its 2018 humanitarian response plan. The World Food Program was forced to cut rations in half for the most vulnerable families nearly a year ago, due to lack of funding. Earlier this year, U.N. Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator Ursula Mueller stated unequivocally: “If we do not receive funding, people will die.”

Second, lack of stability in CAR has implications for broader regional instability. CAR is located in a volatile and impoverished region with a long history of development, governance, and human rights problems. Violence in CAR only adds to the enormous human suffering in neighboring countries such as Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan. Other countries bordering CAR continue to struggle against the Boko Haram insurgency. We know that instability throughout the world can directly impact United States’ interests. It is in our interests to promote stability and peace throughout the region.

Third, the U.S. has invested \$1 billion in CAR in the past two years; promoting lasting stability and governance is the surest way for our investments to yield positive results. Our Permanent Representative to the UN, Ambassador Nikki Haley, has spent considerable time focusing on cutting peace keeping costs, and the Administration has signaled its desire to limit

funding for UN peacekeeping missions. However, it has spent precious little time investing in diplomatic strategies and initiatives to end the conflicts that have necessitated these missions and would support their success. Doing so would be more cost-effective as well as having a positive impact on those impacted by conflict.

The situation is dire. In the absence of action by the Administration, along with our partners in the international community, the risk of the CAR fully collapsing is high. But while it might be difficult to turn back the increasing tide of violence facing the country, it is not impossible. I urge the Administration to take the following steps:

Fully staff senior leadership positions at the Department of State and USAID. It is well past time for this Administration to put our foreign policy house in order to best advance American interests. The Administration has not nominated an Ambassador to CAR, leaving the post vacant for over six months. It also has not nominated an Assistant Secretary of State for Africa to coordinate policy and engage with counterparts in the region and among our partners in Europe and elsewhere. There is no Assistant Administrator for Africa at USAID at a time of unprecedented humanitarian needs on the continent. We need high ranking diplomats and aid officials to bring fresh ideas and energy into policy discussions in Washington, and galvanize action in capitols of other countries. Quickly filling vacancies is an easily accomplished task that would have a significant impact.

Formulate an updated strategy for CAR. Fully staffed or not, given the situation on the ground the Administration must act. Three years ago, the Obama Administration put forward

such a strategy in response to legislation. This Administration should follow up – and respond to changing conditions on the ground – by putting in place a multiyear, comprehensive strategy to support greater peace and stability in CAR as a foundation for future development and prosperity. Such a plan should include humanitarian and development goals in addition to plans for diplomatic actions and engagement.

Work with other donors and the United Nations to incentivize greater progress on disarmament, demobilization and reintegration and security sector reform. The 2015 “Bangui Forum” called for all combatants to give up their weapons prior to national elections in 2016. This process was never undertaken. A renewed effort a year ago has yet to yield significant results. We must continue support for rule of law and accountability. Financial and diplomatic support for CAR’s nascent special criminal court is also critical to fulfilling this process.

Finally, we must signal our intention to follow through with commitments to the people of CAR and to our international partners by sending a high level delegation from Washington to CAR, and inviting President Touadera to the United States for an official visit.

Mr. President, none of the policy recommendations I am suggesting are particularly difficult. All it takes is time, attention and, to be frank, an interest in being involved to devise a strategy and determine how to adequately fund it. I urge the Administration not to let a tragedy occur due to indifference.