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The contribution of the interfaith platform to the reconciliation process in the Central African Republic



Table of Contents

Preface

1	Introduction	1
2	Historical outline	1
3	Pre-conflict situation and social structure	3
4	Crisis development	5
5	The role of the religious leaders	9
5.1	Written statements from the CAR's Church leaders	9
5.1.1	Bangui Declaration I: Breaching indifference	9
5.1.2	Bangui Declaration II	10
5.2	Initial steps of joint action	10
5.3	International high-level meetings	12
6	Prospects and limitations	16
7	Conclusion	19

Preface

On 10 April 2014, the UN Security Council unanimously decided that a peacekeeping mission would be sent to the Central African Republic in September 2014. This is a remarkable step, one which until recently was considered implausible. What is even more extraordinary is the role played by the National Interfaith Peace Platform, from efforts to restore the social fabric of the country to persuading the Security Council to take action. Efforts by religious leaders to salvage national governance are ongoing. Of late it was also announced that the Peace Platform's commitment to reconciliation has paved the way for a permanent centre for peace initiatives.¹

This document is an account of the journey from the initiative to the decision. Its intention is to explain the nature of the Peace Platform's activities, so that the proposed model of a viable society may be used to contribute to national reconciliation outside the confines of the Central African Republic (CAR).

¹Conciliation Resources, 'Faith Leaders in the CAR Launch a National Interfaith Peace Platform', 2014 <<http://www.c-r.org/CAR-national-interfaith-peace-platform>> [accessed 29 April 2014].

1 Introduction

The Central African Republic is at the heart of Africa. Ravaged by violence, it is experiencing the worst crisis in its history. The consequence of manipulating religion for political purposes in the country is both self-evident and alarming. This makes the campaign for peace involving the religious leaders of the Central African Republic (CAR), with the President of the National Evangelical Alliance playing a key role, all the more remarkable. From initiating the process of reconciliation in remote villages to relevant high level meetings internationally, the heads of the Protestant, Catholic and Muslim communities have been working together tirelessly for months to restore the social fabric of their country.

Are their efforts worthwhile? This paper aims to examine the role of the interreligious peacebuilding campaign by Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga, Pastor Guerekoyame-Gbangou, and Imam Oumar Kobine Layama in the country's reconciliation process and the extent to which their commitment can contribute to the restoration of the CAR .

Starting out with a historical outline and a snapshot of the country's pre-conflict social structure will provide a better understanding of the current crisis development. The core focuses on written statements by the country's Christian communities and then pays closer attention to the joint Muslim and Christian efforts to promote reconciliation within the various communities of the country.² This requires not only the work of the religious leaders on the ground but also of high-level meetings all around the world. The latter gives an insight into the international discussion but does not cover all their trips. The document closes with the prospects and limitations of the interfaith platform.

2 Historical outline

Even though the country has a long history, there is little written record of the indigenous population. The first transcripts date from the 17th century, when Arab slave raiders entered the region.³ France occupied the area soon after and named it Oubangui-Chari. In 1894, the land was unified with Gabon and Middle Congo to become French Equatorial Africa.⁴ On 10 November 1946, approximately 20,000 eligible voters of Oubangui-Chari won the right to vote for a delegate for the French National Assembly for the first time. The vote winner was

² There are no official written documents issued by Muslims so far.

³ Matt Doeden, *Central African Republic in Pictures* (Twenty-First Century Books, 2009), p. 4.

⁴ International Business Publication USA, *Central African Republic Foreign Policy and Government Guide* (Washington, DC: Int'l Business Publications, 2007), p. 46.

Barthélemy Boganda, a Catholic priest who led Oubangui-Chari's independence movement in the following years. He sought to create a large central African state defined by the borders of French Equatorial Africa with the possible inclusion of Belgian, Spanish and Portuguese colonial territories. However, his plans to avoid Oubangui-Chari becoming a small, landlocked country failed largely as a result of France's conflicting interests. The Father of the Nation, as Boganda was often referred to, was not able to witness the independence of the colony in 1960 as he had been killed in a plane crash a year before.⁵ Boganda's nephew, David Dacko, became the first president of the Central African Republic.⁶ Whereas he relied domestically on setting up the elite of various ethnic groups as a governing committee known as MESAN (Movement for the Social Evolution of Black Africa), the country largely remained under French control in external affairs.⁷ Two years after his inauguration he endorsed MESAN as the only legal party and thus won the elections that were held in 1964. When the commander of the army, Jean-Bédél Bokassa, who was also his cousin,⁸ seized power in a staged coup just a year later, the economy had already declined rapidly and the national debt was increasing constantly.

Under Bokassa's authority, the constitution was abolished, parliament dissolved and the opposition was suppressed. In 1976 he crowned himself Emperor of the Central African Empire in an extravagant ceremony.⁹ The government debt soared and when salaries and scholarships could no longer be met, discontent grew. After the brutal repression of student protests, France ceased to support Bokassa and restored Dacko as president.¹⁰ His return was not well received however, and he had to rely on French paratroops to defend his presidency. André Kolingba, appointed by the president as chief of staff of the armed forces in 1981, used this enduring instability to displace Dacko in a bloodless coup the same year. In the early 1990s calls for more democracy became louder throughout the country. Riots broke out when salaries could not be paid once again. Kolingba finally gave in to demands for a more pluralistic political system and allowed other parties to nominate their own candidates for the presidency. However, he was not successful in the forthcoming elections in 1993 and thus

⁵Wolfgang Fengler and Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, *Politische Reformhemmnisse Und Ökonomische Blockierung in Afrika: Die Zentralafrikanische Republik Und Eritrea Im Vergleich*, Aktuelle Materialien Zur Internationalen Politik / Stiftung Wissenschaft Und Politik, Ebenhausen, Bd. 63 (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2001), pp. 94–96.

⁶Harris M. Lentz, *Heads of States and Governments Since 1945* (Routledge, 2014), p. 151.

⁷Pierre Kalck, ed., *Historical Dictionary of the Central African Republic*, Historical Dictionaries of Africa, no. 93, 3rd ed (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2005), p. 53.

⁸Lentz, p. 151.

⁹International Business Publication USA, p. 48.

¹⁰Kalck, p. 102.

Ange-Félix Patassé, a cousin of Bokassa's principal wife,¹¹ became the first democratically voted president since the country's independence. Patassé's government was characterized by civil unrest. During his mandate he was confronted by three army rebellions and several lootings in Bangui, which had severe consequences on the infrastructure of the capital. Even though under Patassé's rule the country had been forced to rely on peacekeeping troops under the UN mission, he was re-elected president in September 1999.¹²

Four years later his government was overthrown by a rebellion led by François Bozizé, formerly his army chief of staff.¹³ Bozizé admitted: "I took power with Chad's help".¹⁴ Bozizé's seizure of power would have been impossible without the support of President Idriss Déby of Chad: four fifths of the troops that captured Bangui were Chadian.¹⁵ His personal bodyguard also comprised more than 80 Chadian military personnel. The increasing military presence of Chad as well as the continuous French tutelary influence meant that the CAR was on the verge of becoming a "vassal state".¹⁶ Nepotism reached worrying levels: more than 20 members of parliament belonged to Bozizé's direct family, including his wife, his sons and cousins.¹⁷

3 Pre-conflict situation and social structure

Since the Central African Republic (former colony Oubangui-Chari) gained independence from France in 1960 the country has faced a series of events leading to political instability. As indicated above, four of the seven presidents were removed from power by unconstitutional means, namely coups d'état with close familial connections. Due to a lack of state authority in large areas outside of the capital Bangui, the country is often referred to as a phantom state.¹⁸ Ethnic conflicts in the northern CAR as well as the presence of the notorious Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in the south continue to exacerbate security.¹⁹

¹¹Kaye Whiteman, 'Ange-Félix Patassé Obituary - The Central African Republic's Flamboyant Former President', 2011 <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jun/14/ange-felix-patasse-obituary>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

¹²International Business Publication USA, p. 49.

¹³Kalck, p. 33.

¹⁴ International Crisis Group, 'Central African Republic: Anatomy of a Phantom State', 2007, p. 17 <<http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/africa/central-africa/central-african-republic/136-central-african-republic-anatomy-of-a-phantom-state.aspx>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

¹⁵International Crisis Group, 'Central African Republic: Anatomy of a Phantom State', p. 16.

¹⁶International Crisis Group, 'Central African Republic: Anatomy of a Phantom State', p. 17.

¹⁷ Louisa Lombard, 'Central African Republic: Peacebuilding without Peace', 2011 <<http://africanarguments.org/2011/08/26/central-african-republic-peacebuilding-without-peace/>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

¹⁸International Crisis Group, 'Central African Republic: Anatomy of a Phantom State'.

¹⁹ United Nations Department of Political Affairs, 'Central African Republic', 2014 <http://www.un.org/wcm/content/site/undpa/main/activities_by_region/africa/central_african_republic> [accessed 30 April 2014].

With more than 80 different ethnic groups, the CAR represents a truly multiethnic country.²⁰ Comprising 33% of the CAR'S population of approximately 5.3 million people (July 2014),²¹ the Baya in the west of the country constitutes the biggest ethnic group. The populous Banda (27%) mainly resides in the east central and southern regions of the CAR. The Mandjia (13%), the Sara (10%), and the Mboum (7%) occupy the savannah. The Yakoma and the M'baka in the south each accounts for 4%. The forest regions are inhabited by a small population of Pygmy and Bantu groups.²² The country's northeast is home to people of Nilotic origin such as the Gula in the Vakaga prefecture, who are predominantly Muslim pastoralists, and two indigenous non-Muslim sultanates. Although a variety of tribal languages exist, the national language Sango is widely spoken and serves to mitigate ethnic differences.²³ The language stems from the Sango people who were river traders from the south originally. As the Sango tribe spread from the Oubangui River, its 400,000 native speakers were exposed to other languages and it emerged as the *lingua franca*.²⁴ As a result of the CAR's colonial legacy the official language is French.²⁵

While Christians represent the country's religious majority, accounting for 25% of Roman Catholic believers and 25% Protestants, 35% of the population professes indigenous beliefs, and 15% are Muslims.²⁶ Traditionally the different religious groups lived together in peaceful co-existence. The southern and north western regions of the country are by comparison rather densely inhabited and mainly Christian. In contrast the northeast is relatively sparsely populated and being predominantly Muslim. Many of the latter are descendants of groups who fled trans-Saharan slave trade in the 19th century. Due to their involvement in those trades as well as still on-going cross-border relations, southerners tend to refer to north eastern people as "foreigners" (Sudanese or Chadian). This is expressed in special surveillance of their travel activities²⁷ or discriminatory patterns of denial of full citizenship.²⁸ In colonial

²⁰ Encyclopedia of the Nations, 'Ethnic Groups - Central African Republic', 2014 <<http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/Africa/Central-African-Republic-ETHNIC-GROUPS.html>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

²¹Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), 'The World Factbook', 2014 <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ct.html>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

²²Encyclopedia of the Nations.

²³Dennis Pastoor, *Vulnerability Assessment of the Christians in the Central African Republic* (World Watch Unit - Open Doors International, 2013), p. 11.

²⁴National African Language Resource Centre, 'Sango', 2010 <<http://www.nalrc.indiana.edu/brochures/Sango.-pdf>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

²⁵Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

²⁶Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

²⁷Louisa Lombard, 'Central African Republic: President Michel Djotodia and the Good Little Putschist's Tool Box', 2013 <<http://africanarguments.org/2013/04/02/central-african-republic-president-michel-djotodia-and-the-good-little-putschist%E2%80%99s-tool-box-by-louisa-lombard/>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

²⁸Alexis Arieff, *Crisis in the Central African Republic* (Congressional Research Service, 2014), p. 9.

times the north eastern regions of today's prefectures of Vakaga and Bamingui-Bangoran were labelled "autonomous zone" as being destitute and too remote to be fully integrated into administration.²⁹

It is important to stress that the country's conflicts are not primarily of a religious nature, but also stem from a deeper level of tension, i.e. ethnic patronage; after all, Kolingba, Patassé and Bozizé considered themselves Christians. But Kolingba favoured his own ethnic group - the Yakoma, while his successor Patassé explicitly dismissed the Yakoma. Instead he rewarded his supporters from north western parts of the country, predominantly Sara-Kaba, with governmental positions. Bozizé, in turn, privileged the Gbaya.³⁰

A distinctive urban bias, especially towards the capital Bangui (which is also in the south), adds to the large number of disparities.³¹ This becomes particularly evident in the area of government expenditure: Bangui, home of 30% of the Central African population exhausts nearly 90% of state spending.³²

With more than 60% of the CAR's inhabitants being under the age of 24 its average population is very young. While this could represent a great advantage, it also remains challenging as the literacy rate among those aged 15 and over is just 56.6%.³³

4 Crisis development

Although from the very beginning the CAR has been an extremely fragile state, the recent conflict is considered the worst the country has ever experienced.³⁴ The crisis began in December 2012 when the Seleka ("Alliance" in the Sango language)³⁵, a coalition of four mainly Muslim rebel groups led by Michel Djotodia, started their aggressive march towards Bangui, making steady gains in the northern and central regions of the country. A few months before that, President Déby of Chad's had already criticized Bozizé's inability to manage the unrest in the northern regions of the CAR as he feared the instability would spill over into southern Chad. Subsequently he withdrew the Chadian members of Bozizé's bodyguard and

²⁹Louisa Lombard, 'Central African Republic: President Michel Djotodia and the Good Little Putschist's Tool Box'.

³⁰ Stephanie Burchard, 'The Central African Conflict Is about Far More than Religion', 2014 <<http://thinkafricapress.com/central-african-republic/identity-politics-coding-religion>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

³¹Fengler and StiftungWissenschaft und Politik, p. 122.

³²Fengler and StiftungWissenschaft und Politik, p. 123.

³³Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

³⁴Reverend Nicolas Guerekoyame-Gbangou and Imam OumarKobineLayama, Interview, 2014.

³⁵Alexis Arieff, 'Hearing on Responding to the Humanitarian, Security and Governance Crisis in the Central Africa Republic on 17 December 2013 - Testimony of Alexis Arieff', 2013 <<http://www.foreign.senate.gov/download/2013/12/17/testimony-9>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

allegedly made preliminary contacts with the rebels.³⁶ It stands to reason that Déby had already given up on Bozizé's government and was looking to enable future cooperation in case of a takeover by Djotodia's rebels. The French historian and Africa expert Gérard Prunier goes even further in claiming that Déby intentionally provided rebels from Darfur to fight under Djotodia's leadership in order to get rid of the Sudanese militiamen in Chad whom he perceived as a threat to his rule.³⁷ Djotodia hails from the north eastern Vakaga prefecture. He studied in Russia and later became the leader of the UFDR (Union for Democratic Forces for Unity), a rebel group that emerged in 2006. He captured a number of north eastern towns and aimed to take Bangui.³⁸ While the UFDR predominantly consists of ethnic Gula,³⁹ other rebel groups that also formed the Seleka belonged to the Runga amongst others that also live in the northern CAR.⁴⁰ Having competed for natural resources and land for a long time, the rival ethnic groups were now fighting together in the alliance.⁴¹ However, the Seleka also included Chadian and Sudanese mercenaries.⁴²

The ceasefire, which was stipulated in the Libreville Agreements under the auspices of ECCAS (Economic Community of Central African States) in January 2013, did not last long.⁴³ Considering President Bozizé's refusal to implement the previously agreed power-sharing-agreement, ECCA's inadequate monitoring of the peace agreement, as well as Seleka's tactical advantage on the ground, it was not surprising that peace efforts remained fruitless.⁴⁴

On 24 March 2013, the Seleka rebels were able to take over Bangui. Subsequently Bozizé fled the country, and Michel Djotodia declared himself President. He subsequently repealed the constitution and dissolved the national assembly. As the pressure of the international community increased and the CAR was suspended from the African Union (AU), Djotodia

³⁶ International Crisis Group, *Central African Republic: Priorities of the Transition*, 2013, p. 9 <<http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/africa/central-africa/central-african-republic/203-central-african-republic-priorities-of-the-transition.aspx>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

³⁷ Rebekka Fiedler, 'Geneva Centre for Security Policy: Public Discussion "What Is Happening in the Central African Republic?" on 29 April 2014 - Top Line Notes', 2014.

³⁸ Louisa Lombard, 'Central African Republic: President Michel Djotodia and the Good Little Putschist's Tool Box'.

³⁹ Human Rights Watch, 'Rebellion in the Northeast - Report 2007', 2007 <<http://www.hrw.org/reports/2007/car0907/7.htm>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

⁴⁰ International Crisis Group, 'Monthly Bulletin September 2011', 2011, p. 2 <<http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/crisiswatch/crisiswatch-database.aspx?CountryIDs={09F69924-3E63-461D-96FE-A0B25D54EFEB}>>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

⁴¹ International Crisis Group, *Central African Republic: Priorities of the Transition*, pp. 6–7.

⁴² Human Rights Watch, 'Central African Republic: Seleka Fighters Regroup in North', 2014 <<http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/02/05/central-african-republic-seleka-fighters-regroup-north>>.

⁴³ Robert P. Jackson, 'Crisis in the Central African Republic', *U.S. Department of State*, 2013 <<http://www.state.gov/p/af/rls/rm/2013/217725.htm>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

⁴⁴ International Crisis Group, *Central African Republic: Priorities of the Transition*.

agreed upon a compromise that was negotiated with ECCAS at two summits in the Chadian capital of N'Djamena in April 2013: the drafting of a transitional constitution and the swearing in of Djotodia as interim president. Furthermore, he was obliged to hold elections by February 2015.⁴⁵ To some extent Djotodia's rule marked a new era in the CAR's history. While all previous heads of the state originated from southern or north western regions, Djotodia was the first president from the north eastern areas.⁴⁶

Even though some Bangui residents welcomed the rebel's overthrow of the government, Seleka's takeover soon resulted in looting, clashes and atrocities which provoked increasing resentment among the population.⁴⁷ Djotodia had never had a strong command of his own Seleka forces as he had been unable to pay their salaries. As a result of the collapse of national armed forces, the Central African Armed Forces (FACA), and the largely absent government authorities outside of Bangui, the interim President was not capable of controlling the Seleka groups in their criminal operations motivated by personal gain. The Seleka commanders, which included Chadian and Sudanese rebel leaders, terrorized the population in the hinterlands. Their relative autonomy was adding to Djotodia's impotence in containing the violence.⁴⁸ This gave rise to mainly Christian and Animist self-defence groups called *anti-Balaka*, which means "anti-machete" in the Gbaya language. The anti-Balaka has its roots in local defence groups whose members have undergone spiritual rituals in order to make them impervious to bullets. Striving for their return to power, politicians deposed by Djotodia, including Bozizé and some of his confidants, provided funding and supplies to the anti-Balaka rebels. Bearing that in mind, it is not surprising that Patrice-Edouard Ngaïssona, the self-proclaimed coordinator of the anti-Balaka, was a former parliamentarian and minister of youth and sports under Bozizé. Ngaïssona operates from a fortified hideout in Bangui.⁴⁹ His leadership is more than tentative since the anti-Balaka constitutes a very loose alliance which is scarcely coordinated.⁵⁰

In the following months, acts of retaliation led to what the Archbishop of Bangui feared and described as a "return match".⁵¹ The surge of anti-Balaka's attacks increasingly targeted not

⁴⁵Robert P. Jackson.

⁴⁶Louisa Lombard, 'Central African Republic: President Michel Djotodia and the Good Little Putschist's Tool Box'.

⁴⁷International Crisis Group, *Central African Republic: Priorities of the Transition*, p. 18.

⁴⁸Robert P. Jackson.

⁴⁹Louisa Lombard, 'Pervasive Mistrust Fuels C.A.R. Crisis', 2014 <<http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/4/central-africa-republicgenocideselekaantibalaka.html>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

⁵⁰Rebekka Fiedler, 'Geneva Centre for Security Policy: Public Discussion "What Is Happening in the Central African Republic?" on 29 April 2014 - Top Line Notes'.

⁵¹International Crisis Group, *Central African Republic: Better Late than Never*, 2013, p. 4.

only Seleka members but soon included Muslim families. With Seleka's continued killings amongst the Christian population the cycle of violence on both sides could not be broken.⁵² In September 2013 interim President Djotodia officially dissolved the Seleka.⁵³ By the end of the year however, killings in Bangui were reported on a daily basis. Unprecedented levels of cruelty were seen: corpses were mutilated publicly and dismemberments and beheadings took place with full impunity.⁵⁴ On 5 December 2013 the Security Council adopted Resolution 2127, which endowed the African-led International Support Mission in the Central African Republic (MISCA) with a robust mandate to take all necessary measures to protect civilians and restore public order and security.⁵⁵ France deployed around 1,200 troops soon after, bolstering its existing forces to 1,600.⁵⁶ The 6000-strong MISCA came under increasing fire however when it became apparent that its Chadian soldiers were partially siding with Seleka members. This finally led Chad to the withdrawal of its roughly 850 troops in April 2014.⁵⁷ Due to the deteriorating humanitarian situation, and Djotodia being seen as unable to stabilize the country in preparation for the promised elections in 2015, he was forced to resign at a regional summit hosted by Chad on 10 January 2014. Ten days later the members of the CAR's National Transitional Council (CNT) elected Catherine Samba-Panza as the new interim President. Samba-Panza was trusted to represent the interest of all Central Africans as she was not affiliated with the Seleka or the anti-Balaka. Furthermore, being a Christian and having been appointed mayor of Bangui by the Seleka-led government, her election reflects efforts to satisfy both sides.⁵⁸

Since the crisis began in December 2012, thousands of civilians have fallen victim to unspeakable atrocities, and left about 2.2 million, corresponding roughly to half of the

⁵²International Crisis Group, *Central African Republic: Better Late than Never*, p. 4.

⁵³Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, *Timeline of the International Response to the Situation in the Central African Republic (CAR)*, 2013 <<http://www.globalr2p.org/publications/276>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

⁵⁴Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the Central African Republic Submitted pursuant to Paragraph 48 of Security Council Resolution 2127 (2013)*, 2013, p. 2 <http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2014/142> [accessed 30 April 2014].

⁵⁵Permanent Mission of France to the United Nations in New York, '5 December 2013 - CAR / Adoption of Resolution 2127 - Explanation of Vote by Mr. Gérard Araud, Permanent Representative of France to the United Nations', 2013 <<http://www.franceonu.org/france-at-the-united-nations/press-room/statements-at-open-meetings/security-council/article/5-december-2013-car-adoption-of-7657>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

⁵⁶Alexis Arieff, *Crisis in the Central African Republic*.

⁵⁷Deutsche Welle (DW), 'Chad Withdrawing Troops from African Union's CAR Peacekeeping Mission', 2014 <<http://www.dw.de/chad-withdrawing-troops-from-african-unions-car-peacekeeping-mission/a-17542014>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

⁵⁸International Crisis Group - Africa Program Staff, 'Central African Republic: The Third Government in Thirteen Months Gets Under Way', 2014 <<http://www.crisisgroupblogs.org/africanpeacebuilding/2014/01/21/-central-african-republic-the-third-government-in-thirteen-months-gets-under-way/>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

country's population, in need of humanitarian aid. Over 650,000 people are still internally displaced and more than 290,000 have fled to neighbouring countries for refuge.⁵⁹

5 The role of the religious leaders

5.1 Written statements of the CAR's Church leaders

5.1.1 Bangui Declaration I: Breaking indifference

Having witnessed an increasing number of killings, acts of looting and other violations of human rights since March 2013, Central African Christians issued a joint appeal to the international community to help end the bloodshed. On 6 October 2013, prominent church leaders representing all known denominations, including the president of the Evangelical Alliance of Central Africa, the Reverend Nicolas Guerkoame-Gbangou and the president of the Episcopal Conference in Central Africa, Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga, presented the Bangui declaration, which they had drafted at a three-day conference in Bangui hosted by the Christian NGO Open Doors.⁶⁰ The declaration bears witness to the precarious humanitarian situation in the CAR, with mention of 1,600,000 internally displaced persons, more than 480,000 victims of malnutrition, approximately 3,500 children recruited by armed groups and the church leaders' fear of an emerging religious conflict. Emphasizing that "the Muslim community has always lived in peaceful coexistence with the non-Muslim population", the Christian Central Africans were deeply worried about the surge of attacks against Christians and non-Muslims.⁶¹ After outlining the country's needs in the security, humanitarian, political, and economic domain the declaration ends with the church's plea to the international community to "fly rapidly to the rescue, to prevent the country from falling into the hands of extremists and religious fanatics".⁶²

⁵⁹United Nations News Centre, 'Security Council Establishes UN Peacekeeping Mission in Central African Republic', 2014 <<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=47541&&Cr=Central+African+Republic-&&Cr1=#.U0eoLFefJJI>> [accessed 28 April 2014].

⁶⁰ Open Doors Singapore, 'Church Pleads for Action for Central Africa Republic', 2013 <<http://opendoorssg.wordpress.com/2013/10/14/church-pleads-for-action-for-central-africa-republic/>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

⁶¹ Franco Mbaye-Bandoi and others, 'Bangui Declaration: Breaking Indifference', 2013, p. 2 <http://www.google.ch/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CC0QFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.each.ch%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2FBangui%2520Declaration%2520-%2520Break%2520the%2520Indifference.pdf&ei=9ANHU7PTFcOQ7Aauj4CoBQ&usq=AFQjCNE63ftJmxL2J_jyMw-E4qe0ieZj6g&sig2=4gL-5MMZWOzqQtX88Nigow&bvm=bv.64507335,d.ZGU> [accessed 30 April 2014].

⁶²Franco Mbaye-Bandoi and others, 'Bangui Declaration: Breaking Indifference', p. 4.

5.1.2 Bangui Declaration II

Taking into account the changing situation, the church leaders of the country met again and discussed an update to their first declaration on 4 February 2014. Bearing in mind the increase in reprisal actions committed by the anti-Balaka, the signatories explicitly point out the anti-Balaka is not a priori synonymous with Christian. In the same way the ex-Seleka is not a priori synonymous with Muslim.⁶³ The document points out clearly that the church leaders condemn violence of any origin and denounce the unjust execution of Muslims carried out by mobs that accuse them of complicity with Seleka members. In this context it is stressed that Muslims and Christians belong to the same biological family and further highlights that both are descendants of Abraham.⁶⁴ Furthermore, the declaration stresses the responsibility of all Central Africans to engage in a process of reconciliation to end the vicious cycle of reprisal and restore the social cohesion of the country. It then develops this by appealing to the responsibility of the transitional government under Samba-Panza and the international community and urging them to “let their hearts and minds act in favour of the Central African people”⁶⁵ in accordance with their suggestions, including extensive disarmament and well supervised humanitarian aid.⁶⁶

5.2 Initial steps of joint action

In view of the thousands of people who have fallen victim to unspeakable atrocities and killings, Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga underlines that “prayers have to be oriented to reconciling hearts - to disarm hearts”⁶⁷ to finally end the cycle of reprisals. Together with Imam Oumar Kobine Layama, president of the Central African Islamic Community, and Reverend Nicolas Guerekoyame-Gbangou, president of the Evangelical Alliance in the CAR, he travelled throughout the country to initiate interreligious dialogue between the two communities divided by hatred and fear. They first came together in December 2012 when the then president Bozizé was inciting Christians to take up arms against the Muslim minority. He scared them with a looming wave of Islamification in view of the steady gains the Seleka

⁶³ Franco Mbaye-Bandoi and others, ‘Bangui Declaration II’, 2014, p. 1 <http://www.google.ch/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&ved=0CDIQFjAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.worldidea.org%2Fimages%2Fwimg%2Ffiles%2FBangui_II.pdf&ei=VhtHU7_ILKLS0QXc5IHYCQ&usg=AFQjCNEWny_c45JvWP1edzA5GurCIKrRag&sig2=WVvKQtmvW6tUzIawpNYA0eg&bvm=bv.64507335,d.d2k> [accessed 30 April 2014].

⁶⁴ Franco Mbaye-Bandoi and others, ‘Bangui Declaration II’, p. 3.

⁶⁵ Franco Mbaye-Bandoi and others, ‘Bangui Declaration II’, p. 5.

⁶⁶ Franco Mbaye-Bandoi and others, ‘Bangui Declaration II’, pp. 4–5.

⁶⁷ Gary Lane, Christian Broadcast Network, ‘Women, Children Being “Killed Openly” in CAR’, 2014 <<http://www.cbn.com/cbnnews/world/2014/March/Women-Children-Being-Killed-Openly-in-CAR/>>.

rebel groups, led by Michel Djotodia, were making in the north of the country.⁶⁸ A year later in December 2013, Imam Oumar Kobine Layama was repeatedly subjected to death threats from the anti-Balaka militia. He found refuge in Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga's residence.⁶⁹ Shortly afterwards the imam's own house was looted and burnt down by a violent mob.⁷⁰

In September, when Djotodia officially dissolved the Seleka, the three clerics visited numerous villages encouraging Muslim and Christian residents to demonstrate through their friendship that the root cause of the conflict is not religious.⁷¹ In some regions the tensions were almost tangible: when arriving in Bossangoa, a town 270 km north of the capital, Imam Oumar Kobine Layama was too afraid to even get out of the car. But Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga and Pastor Nicolas Guerekoyame-Gbangou stood beside him protecting him by calling him their brother.⁷² However, in some villages even their improbable solidarity only had a limited influence on the local anti-Balaka groups. It is difficult to persuade them to disband and return to their homes. Most rebels witnessed their family members being killed by the Seleka and are now fighting for the eradication of the country's Muslim community as a whole. In addition, the archbishop, the imam, and the pastor are striving to persuade the few remaining Muslims of the country not to follow others across the border into Chad. About 80 percent of the CAR's Muslims have left already as troops were slow to adjust to the new threat of the anti-Balaka militia.⁷³ While recognizing the numerous challenges they have faced during their tour, the religious leaders remain optimistic and persistent. The Archbishop compares this "to the old story of the young man with his fiancée. I come to you and you refuse me, so I come back again – and I'll keep coming back till I hear you declare your love for me".⁷⁴ The religious leaders advert to places where Muslims and Christians still live side-by-side. One example is the archbishop's hometown Bangassou, which is situated east of the capital. They are also encouraged by the fact that wherever they have gone, people have

⁶⁸CARITAS, 'Peace in Central African Republic: An Archbishop, an Imam and a Pastor Join Forces', 2013 <<http://www.caritas.org/2013/11/peace-central-african-republic-archbishop-imam-pastor-join-forces/>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

⁶⁹Jim Wallis, TIME Magazine, 'Imam Omar Kobine Layama, Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga and Rev. Nicolas Guérékoyame-Gbangou: The World's 100 Most Influential People', 2014 <<http://time.com/70894/nicolas-guerekoyame-gbangou-2014-time-100/>> [accessed 29 April 2014].

⁷⁰ British Broadcast Company (BBC), 'CAR's Archbishop and Imam in Peace Drive', 2014 <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-26938341>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

⁷¹CAFOD, 'Central African Republic Policy Briefing', 2013 <<http://www.cafod.org.uk/content/download/13-051/101259/file/CAR%20Humanitarian%20Policy%20Brief%2014112013.docx>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

⁷²Arie de Pater, Open Doors, 'CAR Info (personal email correspondence)', 2014.

⁷³FOX News, 'C. African Republic Religious Leaders Plead for UN Peacekeepers; 20 Percent of Muslims Remain', 2014 <<http://www.foxnews.com/world/2014/03/14/c-african-republic-religious-leaders-plead-for-un-peacekeepers-20-percent/>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

⁷⁴British Broadcast Company (BBC).

listened to them respectfully.⁷⁵ Apart from their peacebuilding tour up and down the CAR, the churches in collaboration with the Islamic community have launched various initiatives to promote the country's process of reconciliation. Their campaign includes calls on national radio to restrain violence, and public meetings for both Muslims and Christians to convey the need for forgiveness. Furthermore, religious leaders used their sermons and homilies to shed light on the importance of peace and reconciliation. In order to protect Muslims from violent mobs, churches in several areas have opened their doors to provide accommodation for them.⁷⁶ In addition, the imam, the pastor and the archbishop, as representatives of the newly launched National Interfaith Peace Platform, are setting up more than 20 community peace committees in Bangui and outside the capital in Haute-Kotto, Haut-Mbomou, Mbomou and Vakaga prefectures in order to promote dialogue in the villages. The peace committees document incidents of violence to identify reasons for and the trends of micro-level conflict. With the participation of Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga and Imam Oumar Kobine Layama, one of the committees also plans to help rebuild a local mosque.⁷⁷

An example of the multiplication of their activities in favour of peace is the community of Lakounga, a suburb in Bangui. In the midst of conflict, on 10 December 2013, one of the parish's Catholic priests together with the local chief countered a group of adolescents who were determined to attack local shops owned by Muslims. Soon after they began talking to them, neighbours from nearby houses joined the discussion in order to persuade the rebels to refrain from violence. Eventually the youths reconsidered their intention and left Lakounga quietly. During the following days local leaders including the suburb's imams and priests carried out several peace promoting activities such as interreligious meetings, which shared how Ugandan leaders were working to rebuild trust between divided communities in their country. A regional NGO also displayed posters on various street corners picturing Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga talking with one of the imams with a clear message underneath: "Christians and Muslims, the same blood, the same life, the same country".⁷⁸

5.3 International high-level meetings

Various global news outlets have depicted the crisis as a war of religions. It therefore seems contradictory that the country's religious leaders are promoting reconciliation. The CAR's

⁷⁵British Broadcast Company (BBC).

⁷⁶Franco Mbaye-Bandoi and others, 'Bangui Declaration II'.

⁷⁷Conciliation Resources.

⁷⁸NyekoCeasarPoblicks, Insight on Conflict, 'Central African Republic: Muslims and Christians in Bangui at Peace amidst War', 2014 <<http://www.insightonconflict.org/2014/01/central-african-republic-grassroots-peace/>> [accessed 29 April 2014].

interfaith peacebuilding efforts have attracted great attention internationally. Recognising the urgent need for security, the three religious leaders sought the support of the international community. In January 2014, Imam Oumar Kobine Layama and Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga flew to Paris to meet President Hollande and later visited Senior Foreign Office Minister Baroness Warsi in London. They pointed out that if African and French forces were not operating in the CAR, “the whole country would have been in flames”.⁷⁹

The UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, whom the religious leaders met on 13 March 2014 in New York, described their work as a “powerful symbol of their country’s longstanding tradition of peaceful coexistence”.⁸⁰ Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga thanked Ban for his personal engagement in reporting on the deteriorating situation in the CAR to the UN Security Council, which included a 6-point plan addressing the greatest needs of the people of the country. Pastor Nicolas Guerekoyame-Gbangou and Imam Oumar Kobine Layama highlighted the importance of the quick deployment of a multidimensional UN peacekeeping operation to create security in order to protect the civilians. The religious leaders also recommended that the priorities of UN forces lay in rebuilding administration and the army, providing additional humanitarian assistance as well as financial support to pay civil servants, and end impunity. In their meeting with U.S. ambassador to the UN, Samantha Power, they reiterated the need for a strong UN peacekeeping mission, but at the same time expressed their thankfulness for the presence of French and African Union troops in the country. However, they pointed out that the number of troops made up of MISCA and the French Operation Sangaris – although boosted in February 2014 to a total of 2,000– is insufficient and even with the additional 800-strong European Union Force (EUFOR), which is expected to be on the ground in May 2014, restoring order will be impossible without further military support.⁸¹

On 14 March 2014, the clerics were invited to directly address the members of the Security Council during an informal Arria-Formula.⁸² The archbishop admonished the Council members that if immediate action is not taken, the “partition of the CAR will lead to a

⁷⁹Martin Plaut, The Guardian, ‘Central African Republic: “Without Help, Our Country Would Be in Flames”’, 2014 <<http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2014/jan/28/central-african-republic-muslim-christian>> [accessed 17 April 2014].

⁸⁰United Nations News Centre, ‘Central African Republic: Ban Meets Religious Leaders, Urges Support for Efforts to Unite Communities’, 2014 <<https://www.un.org/apps/news//story.asp?NewsID=47351&Cr=Central+African+Republic&Cr1=>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

⁸¹Christina Hawley, ‘Delegation of Faith Leaders from CAR to the USA - Meetings in New York - 14th and 15th March 2014 - Top Line Notes’, 2014.

⁸²What’s In Blue, ‘Arria-Formula Meeting with CAR Religious Leaders’, 2014 <<http://www.whatsinblue.org-/2014/03/arria-formula-meeting-with-car-religious-leaders.php>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

genocidal war”.⁸³ Adam Dieng, UN Special Advisor on The Prevention of Genocide, who was also present at the meeting reported that only 20% percent of the CAR’s Muslims still live in their home country as the others have fled or died in the conflict.⁸⁴ The U.S. Ambassador echoed the information provided by the imam: of the 36 mosques in Bangui only 8 remain.⁸⁵

The religious leaders continued their tour in Washington D.C., where they arrived on 17 March 2014.⁸⁶ In the U.S. capital, the delegation met with senior U.S. Government representatives from the State Department, USAID (Administrator Rajiv Shah), and the National Security Council (Senior Director for African Affairs, Grant Harris), calling for support and funding for the UN peacekeeping operation. The interfaith platform also briefed a bipartisan group of Congress members.⁸⁷ In addition, the White House with Melissa Rogers, Special Assistant to President Obama, hosted a roundtable for the delegation, attended by a wide range of religious organizations. The imam, the pastor, and the archbishop reiterated that their main concern is to disarm the Seleka, the anti-Balaka, and the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), which is also operating in the CAR and is known for recruiting children.⁸⁸ On 18 March 2014, the religious leaders participated in a public event at the Brookings Institute. “We all talk about reaching reconciliation but how can we rebuild if nothing is there to build with?” Imam Oumar Kobine Layama used these words to call upon the audience to support the country in its urgent need.⁸⁹ In Washington D.C. they also met with high level representatives from the International Monetary Fund and the Vice President for Africa of the World Bank, Makhtar Diop.

A week later, on 26 March 2014, they were invited to a meeting with Pope Francis in the Vatican. The pope encouraged them to remain united and in close connection with their communities in order to continue to work together to combat attempts of division. He assured

⁸³FOX News.

⁸⁴FOX News.

⁸⁵Christina Hawley.

⁸⁶Kim Pozniak, Catholic Relief Services, ‘Religious Leaders from C. African Republic Seeking Support for Peace on U.S. Visit’, 2014 <<http://newswire.crs.org/religious-leaders-c-african-republic-seeking-support-peace-u-s-visit/>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

⁸⁷CARITAS, ‘Peacebuilding in Central African Republic’, 2014 <<http://www.caritas.org/2014/03/peacebuilding-in-central-african-republic-between-christians-and-muslims/>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

⁸⁸Aniedi Okure, Africa Faith And Justice Network (AFJN), ‘Central African Republic and Witnessing to Religious Values’, 2014 <<http://www.afjn.org/component/content/article/1227-central-african-republic-and-witnessing-to-religious-values.html>> [accessed 17 April 2014].

⁸⁹Fred Dews, Brookings Institution, ‘Interfaith Leaders of Central African Republic Discuss Crisis and Solutions at Brookings’, 2014 <<http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/brookings-now/posts/2014/03/interfaith-leaders-central-african-republic-at-brookings>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

them that he would speak about the CAR in his audience with U.S. President Barack Obama the following day in the Vatican.⁹⁰

On 27 March 2014, they arrived in Geneva where the liaison office of the World Evangelical Alliance in cooperation with CARITAS had organized further relevant meetings with various ambassadors, i.e. the Dutch, German, and the Central African missions, as well as a briefing with the ambassador of the African Union and a representative of the African Group. At the briefing the religious leaders underscored that a looming division of the CAR into a north eastern Muslim and a southern Christian section needs to be prevented. Furthermore, they appealed for financial support for interim President Samba-Panza as she is not able to pay the salaries of her staff. In this context they reiterated the importance of recognizing that Samba-Panza is not responsible for the country's debt.⁹¹ Subsequently invited to Geneva for a discussion with Navi Pillay, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Imam Oumar Kobine Layama stressed the importance of ending impunity and placing justice at the heart of the reconciliation process.⁹² He continued by sharing their vision of initiating reconciliation at the village level. The religious leaders aim to launch profound peace dialogues between the local Muslim and the Christian communities. Through this grassroots approach they expect reconciliation to extend gradually to the highest levels of society and the political sphere.⁹³ The High Commissioner for Human Rights commended these ideas and the courageous steps they have already taken. Pillay thanked them for supporting the work of with the International Commission of Inquiry on the CAR, which is an essential instrument in the strategy to combat impunity. In order to put an end to the ongoing violence in the country, Pillay pledged to continue to advocate the deployment of a strong UN peacekeeping operation, since the numbers provided by MISCA and the French troops are inadequate.⁹⁴ In addition to the appointment with the High Commissioner for Human Rights, further relevant meetings were held, including a briefing with the Ambassador of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) to raise awareness among the world's Islamic community.

⁹⁰News.Va, 'Pope Francis Encourages Faith Leaders of Central African Republic ahead of Meeting with Obama', 2014 <<http://www.news.va/en/news/pope-francis-encourages-faith-leaders-of-central-a>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

⁹¹Rebekka Fiedler, 'Meeting of the CAR's Interfaith Platform with the African Union - 27/03/2014 -Top Line Notes', 2014.

⁹²Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'Religious Leaders' Quest for Peace in the Central African Republic', 2014 <<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/CARReligiousLeaders.aspx>> [accessed 18 April 2014].

⁹³Rebekka Fiedler, 'Meeting of the CAR's Interfaith Platform with the High Commissioner for Human Rights - 27/03/2014 - Top Line Notes', 2014.

⁹⁴Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Following an invitation of the German Bishops' Conference, the religious leaders flew to Berlin where they had appointments with the German Minister of Defence Ursula von der Leyen and the Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development Gerd Müller.⁹⁵ Both underlined the need for security and more humanitarian assistance for the country and assured the religious leaders of Germany's support.

6 Prospects and Limitations

It is rare for a religious delegation like the CAR's interfaith platform to receive such high political attention. The trip to Washington D.C. prompted the U.S. state department in consultation with Dr. William Vendley, the Secretary General of Religions for Peace, to organize a mirror visit to the CAR. Inspired by the Central African interfaith platform, Leith Anderson, President of the National Association of Evangelicals, joined two other religious leaders, Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, American Cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church, and Imam Mohamed Elsanousi, Director of Community Outreach for the Islamic Society of North to a peacebuilding trip at the beginning of April.⁹⁶

In Europe the initiative of the CAR's religious leaders also created a stir. One example is Béziers, a town in southern France where its citizens organized an interreligious peace march for the CAR on 5 April 2014. Inspired by the Central African interfaith platform, the town's Catholics, Protestants and Muslims gathered in order to collectively denounce the ongoing violence in the country. They emphasized that being human is what unites all believers and that religious differences should never lead to intolerance and hatred.⁹⁷

On 10 April 2014, their main request was addressed: the UN Security Council approved the establishment of a 12,000-strong peacekeeping force to demobilize, protect civilians, and support the government's transition process. By unanimously adopting resolution 2149, the Council members authorized the mandate of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in the CAR (MINUSCA). As from 15 September 2014, the new mission will take over the responsibilities of MISCA and will initially comprise up to 10,000 military personnel, as well as 1,800 police personnel, including 1,400 formed police unit personnel,

⁹⁵ Deutsche Bischofskonferenz, 'Pressemeldung: 31. 03. 2014 - Zentralafrikanische Religionsführer Auf Friedensmission in Deutschland', 2014 <<http://www.dbk.de/presse/details/?presseid=2524&cHash=c0dbd8d7-eea688e8f7096ff83376300f>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

⁹⁶ Jim Wallis, TIME Magazine, 'Central African Republic: Christians and Muslims Counter Ethnic Cleansing', 2014 <<http://time.com/author/reverend-nicolas-guerekoyame-gbangou/>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

⁹⁷ Hanan Ben Rhouma, SaphirNews -Quotidienmusulmand'actualité, 'Interreligieux : Une Marche À Béziers Pour La Paix En Centrafrique', 2014 <http://www.saphirnews.com/Interreligieux-une-marche-a-Beziers-pour-la-paix-en-Centrafrique_a18665.html> [accessed 30 April 2014].

400 individual police officers and 20 correction officers.⁹⁸ The Central African interfaith platform undeniably contributed to motivating the Council's decision for the multidimensional peacekeeping operation, as only 6 months before the resolution was adopted in April 2014, UN officials had told Crisis Action that the prospect of such a force was unrealistic.⁹⁹ Even though the troops will not be deployed before September 2014, the adoption of the resolution can be seen as their greatest success internationally as they clearly influenced many of the stakeholders in favour of this decision beforehand.

However, many months before the imam, the pastor, and the archbishop appeared on the international stage, they had been directing all their efforts to restoring the social fabric in their own country. Not only have the religious leaders played a significant role in promoting tolerance and peaceful coexistence, but it is clear that it was their efforts that led to the rebuilding of communities in the first place. A further fraying of the country's social bonds can only be prevented if the Central African people own the reconciliation process. As the High Commissioner for Human Rights highlighted, the transition towards stronger social cohesion cannot be imposed on the country from the outside.¹⁰⁰ That is why the grassroots approach of the imam, the pastor, and the archbishop is so promising. In order to boost their impact on promoting reconciliation they plan to facilitate training sessions for future peace mediators operating in the country's various communities. Organizing village meetings in several prefectures of the CAR and setting up local peace committees means that reconciliation will gradually permeate the country as a whole. Ultimately, these efforts at the local level are intended to influence the political sphere. This is inalienable if the partition of the country along religious lines is to be prevented. The religious leaders plan further projects that will allow pervasive changes to become embedded in society. These include the establishment of interconfessional schools, neutral health centres, as well as holding joint Sunday celebrations for Christians and Muslims, which have already been initiated in Bangui.¹⁰¹ To sensitize a greater share of the population, the religious leaders aim to equip each village with a radio to broadcast the message of reconciliation. In order to facilitate this, technical improvements need to be undertaken as the standard stations can only produce transmit within 60 miles. They also advocate joint farming projects with Muslims and

⁹⁸United Nations News Centre, 'Security Council Establishes UN Peacekeeping Mission in Central African Republic'.

⁹⁹Christine MacMillian, 'Outcomes of CAR's Interfaith Platform (personal Email Correspondence)', April 2014.

¹⁰⁰Rebekka Fiedler, 'Meeting of the CAR's Interfaith Platform with the High Commissioner for Human Rights - 27/03/2014 - Top Line Notes'.

¹⁰¹Rebekka Fiedler, 'Meeting of the CAR's Interfaith Platform with the African Union - 27/03/2014 -Top Line Notes'.

Christians working side-by-side to cultivate their land, which has lain fallow since the beginning of the crisis.¹⁰²

Applauding their activities in favour of peace, TIME magazine named Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga, Reverend Guérékoyame-Gbangou, and Imam Oumar Kobine Layaways among the 100 most influential people in the world in 2014.¹⁰³ The efforts of the interfaith platform depict a remarkable example of how religion has contributed to empowering local people in leading their own reconciliation process and securing a social contract in a situation of state conflict and fragility.

Despite the far reaching influence of the interfaith platform, the question as to what extent they are able to represent their religious communities arises. Even though Imam Oumar Kobine Layama is president of the Central African Islamic Community he stems from the south of the country and does not necessarily cover the Muslim residents in the north of the CAR. It can be argued that the initiatives of the three religious leaders simply constitute an example of chiefs who champion reconciliation, while in reality the general public is led by a deep sense of mistrust towards one another, thereby bringing the authenticity of the former harmonious coexistence into disrepute. Historically, Muslims dominated the commercial sector in the CAR, both market trading and the purchase of commodities such as diamonds. Meanwhile, the Christian majority generally controlled the state and saw themselves as the country's rightful citizens. This divide has always been a source of tension.¹⁰⁴

The special responsibility of the CAR's religious leaders as key players in the reconciliation process is evident. Nevertheless the role of community leaders should not be underestimated in generating a holistic attempt to build peace. Over-emphasizing the interreligious initiatives means losing sight of the political dimension of the conflict.¹⁰⁵

Apart from these difficulties, institutional limitations exacerbate the regeneration of the country. With interim President Samba-Panza lacking the means to pay her staff and MINUSCA unable to operate before September, it will be hard to achieve justice and combat impunity. This in turn is a prerequisite in the prevention of vigilantism and other acts of reprisals that render peacebuilding efforts void. According to the CAR's religious leaders, the

¹⁰²Chatham House, 'Conflict in the Central African Republic: Religion, Power and Prospects for Reconciliation - Africa Meeting Summary', 2014, p. 4 <<http://www.chathamhouse.org/events/view/196799>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

¹⁰³Jim Wallis, TIME Magazine, 'Imam Omar KobineLayama, Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga and Rev. Nicolas Guérékoyame-Gbangou'.

¹⁰⁴Louisa Lombard, New York Times, 'Religious Rhetoric as a Cover', 2014 <<http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2014/04/20/is-religious-extremism-and-terrorism-spreading-in-central-africa/religious-rhetoric-serves-as-a-cover-for-central-african-disputes>> [accessed 30 April 2014].

¹⁰⁵Louisa Lombard, 'Interfaith Platform in CAR (personal email correspondence)', March 2014.

rapidly approaching elections, set to be held in February 2015, could further destabilize the country instead of restoring it.¹⁰⁶

7 Conclusion

How can a country that has been shaken to its very foundations be rebuilt? It can only be rebuilt through healing and reconciliation that starts from within the people. This is what the archbishop, the pastor, and the imam are working towards, both in Central African society and internationally. Encouraging people to assume responsibility at a local level can bring about peace and a new sense of a shared identity and solidarity. It is striking that in the context of a crisis in which the role of religion is questionable, the most prominent peacebuilding efforts emanate from the country's religious leaders who are also laying the foundations of a society – possibly for the first time in the CAR's history.

However, in order for pervasive changes to be possible, more stakeholders need to be included in the reconciliation process. The interfaith platform has set an example of an indigenous political community taking initiative and raising its voice to end the violence. Now it is important to further integrate farmers, school leaders, doctors, lawyers, community leaders, and politicians into the peacebuilding campaign. At the same time the international community is called to continue to support the disarmament of the rebel groups and to effectively combat impunity. The new government faces the challenges of creating security and establishing the rule of law and then gradually rebuilding the war torn country in a way that will benefit not only the people of Bangui or the south, but people of every regions.

Admittedly there is still a long way to go. Restoring trust and creating a new sense of responsibility for each other regardless of one's faith or ethnicity will not be accomplished in a day. The interreligious platform in the CAR "is re-echoing history with present day courage" as Christine Macmillan, the World Evangelical Alliance's Senior Advisor for Social Justice said. Building society takes time but it always needs people who are brave enough to take the first steps to "disarm hearts".¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶Rebekka Fiedler, 'Meeting of the CAR's Interfaith Platform with the African Union - 27/03/2014 -Top Line Notes'.

¹⁰⁷Gary Lane, Christian Broadcast Network.

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