

CAR: no longer forgotten?

by Toby Lanzer and Amanda Weyler

The international community is waking up to the strategic importance of the Central African Republic (CAR) in the crisis over Darfur. Will current interest endure long enough to help the people of CAR beyond the immediate future?

In 2004, when Jean-Bertrand Aristide needed a refuge after being ousted from Haiti, he chose to go to CAR. For years, landlocked CAR was the ideal place for runaways. Tucked away between Chad, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Cameroon, this sparsely populated country – with a population of just over four million but larger in area than France – was overshadowed by its neighbours and their greater claims to strategic interest. CAR's modern history, shaped by a notoriously extravagant self-styled emperor condoned by the West, seemed to have left a bitter taste with the international community. Donors and international organisations were reluctant to invest money or effort in a country which has had 11 mutinies or attempted coups in the past decade.

Today the situation appears different. CAR is starting to pop up in international media. President François Bozize, a former general who seized power in 2003, has legitimised his presidency through elections. There is talk of deployment of a UN peace-keeping force along CAR's border with the Darfur region of Sudan and international NGOs are pouring into the capital, Bangui, for assessment missions. This relatively sudden turn of events raises questions. Why did the world forget about CAR for so long? What has changed? And, perhaps most importantly, what can humanitarian and development actors do to turn the attention CAR is currently enjoying into tangible improvements for its people?

Until 2006 international presence in CAR was extremely limited. Only five international NGOs worked outside the capital, and the various UN agencies present in the country were to a large extent based in Bangui, only moving outside the city with armed escorts. With too few people to tell its story to capitals and headquarters

around the world, funding for humanitarian and development activities was scarce. The fact that CAR was either unknown or seemed to hold little strategic interest for donors deterred new actors from coming into the country, thus creating a vicious circle of forgottenness.

The situation changed dramatically in 2006. The diplomatic deadlock with Sudan over the conflict in Darfur, and the occupation of several towns in north-eastern CAR by armed opposition groups, opened many eyes to CAR's role in the broader crisis playing out in the region. In 2006 the security environment deteriorated steadily especially in the north-east and north-west. It is estimated that 282,000 have been forced to flee their homes due to insecurity. 212,000 remain displaced within CAR's borders. Others have fled into Cameroon, Chad and even Darfur. Fears that the violence in CAR might serve to further destabilise an already fragile region have contributed significantly to the increase in international attention in recent months. Further, a lawless CAR could be used as a launching pad for rebel activities in both Chad and Darfur, rendering prospects of ceasefires or peace deals in those two countries more remote. Echoing that line of thought, the UN Secretary-General has proposed establishment of a UN peacekeeping mission – Mission des Nations Unies au Tchad et en République Centrafricaine (MINUTAC) – to protect civilians caught up in the spillover of the Darfur conflict.¹ In sum, the world has woken up to a key element of CAR's strategic importance.

With that realisation has come a better understanding of the humanitarian needs of the population of CAR. Hundreds of villages have been scorched and thousands of people are hiding in the bush, too afraid to

return to their homes. In March 2007 a UN team which visited Birao, the main town of the Vakaga region near Darfur, found 70% of houses had been torched and the place emptied of its population. A million people are affected by conflict and lawlessness. There is an urgent need for the UN and NGOs to provide food, water, clothing, seeds and tools, shelter, health and education services.

Problems resulting from decades of neglect of development will not be resolved in a matter of months. The crisis unfolding in CAR is not only the result of insurgency and banditry but of chronic poverty and underdevelopment. CAR is the world's seventh least developed country. Over half the population has no access to safe water. Over a third of under-fives are chronically malnourished. Life expectancy is only 42. Seventy-three per cent of the population live on less than \$1 a day. Indicators for maternal and under-five child mortality, already very poor, are in a continuing downward decline. Vast distances from agency HQs complicate provision of humanitarian support, coordination and data collection. Poor weather and non-existent roads impede access to much of the country during six months of the year.

The real challenge for humanitarian and development professionals who operate in the country will be to capitalise on the support they are currently enjoying and to create projects and partnerships which will last even after the spotlight has moved on. Working with the Central African government, which has to continue its current will to improve the lot of its population, will be key. While it is good that CAR is no longer a forgotten crisis, the aim should be that in two or three years there will be no crisis at all.

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1. www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWB.NSF/db900SID/EGUA-6YPS53?OpenDocument