



Top Human Rights expert: Do not forget the Central African Republic and its people

BANGUI/GENEVA/NEW YORK (1 August 2013) - United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights Ivan Šimonović warned Thursday that state institutions throughout the Central African Republic remain “close to collapse” and urged the international community not to abandon the conflict-afflicted nation.

“The relatively inclusive transitional government which has been set up remains very weak. While the situation in Bangui has slightly improved, the state simply does not exist outside of the capital and there is no rule of law,” Šimonović said at the end of a four-day visit to the CAR.

“Beyond Bangui, there is no police, no justice system and no social services. Security is virtually non-existent and people live in constant fear. I was particularly alarmed by the high number of Séléka members in the streets who do not receive any salary and set up check points, asking for money or just looting houses,” the ASG said.

“The extent of the looting and destruction I witnessed is shocking. When I visited Bambari’s courtroom, I only found an empty room with broken doors, no windows and a thick layer of remnants of archives and registries covering the floor. State institutions, including justice, in the Central African Republic look today exactly like this courtroom,” Šimonović said. “How will this country hold fair elections if all its archives and civil registries are being destroyed?” asked the ASG.

“The Central African Republic has been marked by decades of instability and fighting. Under Bozizé’s regime, the predominantly Muslim northern part of the country has been neglected and its population discriminated against. Numerous human rights violations were committed, including enforced disappearances, summary executions, arbitrary detentions and torture. Unfortunately the country has reached an unprecedented level of violence and destruction since the Séléka coalition forces from the north of the country launched their offensive last December,” the ASG said.

While noting that the total number of victims remains unknown, the ASG visited a site of a likely mass grave in Bambari that still has to be investigated. Members of the local community said that victims were summarily executed but could not confirm the identity of perpetrators.

The UN official also expressed his concern about the high rate of sexual violence in the country. “In Bambari hospital, I met an 18-year-old woman who was four months pregnant when she was raped and had a miscarriage. I also met with a woman who was shot in the arm because she refused to give the little money she had earned at the market,” Šimonović said.

“The chaotic situation in the country is affecting all aspects of people’s daily lives,” the ASG noted. “State schools have remained closed since December 2012 and less than 20% of medical facilities are operational,” he said. Afraid of killings and rapes, many people continue to hide in the bush, living on roots.

“Rapidly spreading malaria and other diseases, high maternal mortality and malnutrition are likely to kill many more than the conflict related violence itself,” warned Šimonović. “In some areas, less than 20% of the crops have been planted and severe food shortages can be expected for early 2014,” he said.

“I am extremely concerned by the lack of attention given to the humanitarian and human rights situation in the Central Africa Republic, both by the media and the international community,” he said.

“The conflict in the Central African Republic should not remain forgotten for three main reasons: conflict will continue to impose suffering on large numbers of people, it will deepen the religious and ethnic divide, and it may destabilise the wider region,” warned Šimonović.

“Restoring security is essential to bring some normalcy back throughout the whole country, avoid further deepening the ethnic and religious divide and facilitate national reconciliation,” he said.

“Disarmament, integration and joint training of a limited number of vetted elements of both former security forces and Seleka, excluding perpetrators of human rights violations, is the way forward. However, it does not resolve the problem of the current security vacuum,” the ASG said.

“The regional African ECCAS troops already on the ground urgently need to be reinforced by a larger and more diversified international force under the logistical umbrella of the United Nations,” he said. “This is a key step to restore security and facilitate reform of the security sector and the departure of foreign fighters. Such deployment will also help prepare for free and fair elections within 18 months as envisaged by the Libreville Agreements.”

“Transitional justice and accountability are also key issues for the rebuilding and stability of this country. Our Office has documented numerous human rights violations committed since December 2012. The perpetrators of those crimes should not remain unpunished,” Šimonović said.

During his visit, the Assistant Secretary-General met the Transitional Authorities, including the Prime Minister of the Transitional Government and the Ministers of Justice, Social Affairs, National Solidarity and Gender Promotion and Public Security. He also held discussions with religious leaders and members of civil society organizations and of the international community.

The ASG also visited Bambari, the third biggest town in the country located some 385 km northeast of Bangui, where he met the newly established Prefet, the Seleka commander in charge of the town, NGOs and victims and witnesses of human rights violations. He visited the looted UN premises, the looted Court of Justice and the Regional Hospital, as well as a place where there is an alleged mass grave of civilians and military.

Ivan Šimonović assumed his functions as Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights on 17 July 2010, heading OHCHR's New York Office. To learn more, visit: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/AboutUs/Pages/ASG.aspx>

For more details please contact:

In Central African Republic: Uwolowulakana Ikavi-Gbetanou, +236 75495383 / ikavi@un.org or Chafi Bakari (+41 22 928 9256 / cbakari@ohchr.org) In Geneva: Liz Throssell (+ 41 22 917 9434 or +41 79 201 01 15 / ethrossell@ohchr.org)