

Opening remarks by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay at a press conference during her mission to the Central African Republic

Bangui, 20 March 2014

Sadly, the situation in the Central African Republic is very different from when I last visited the country in February 2010. I will not attempt to run through all the very grave human rights problems facing CAR. Instead, I will focus on a few of the key issues that have emerged during my two days of discussions here in Bangui with, among others, the Head of State of the Transition, the Prime Minister, Minister of Justice, civil society organizations, and the humanitarian agencies who are here in force trying to deal with the complex emergency afflicting much of the country. I also met with a number of diplomats, and with the Head of the African Union peacekeeping force MISCA, as well as the force commanders of both MISCA and the French military force, known as Sangaris.

The situation in the Central African Republic is dire. Although large-scale killings of the type that took place in December and January appear to have halted for the time being, primarily because of the presence of the MISCA and Sangaris in known hot spots, people continue to be killed on a daily basis, especially by the anti-Balaka groups. Around 15,000 Muslims are reportedly trapped in Bangui and other areas in the North, North-West and South of the country, protected by international forces, but nevertheless in an extremely dangerous and untenable situation.

The inter-communal hatred remains at a terrifying level, as evidenced by the extraordinarily vicious nature of the killings. This has become a country where people are not just killed, they are tortured, mutilated, burned and dismembered – sometimes by spontaneous mobs as well as by organized groups of armed fighters. Children have been decapitated, and we know of at least four cases where the killers have eaten the flesh of their victims. I was shown gruesome photographs of one of those cases yesterday by one of the civil society organizations that have been courageously attempting to document violations.

According to both civil society organizations and UN agencies, rape and sexual violence is on the increase, especially in the camps for the internally displaced. Two districts of the capital – PK 5 and PK 12 – remain no-go zones, with trapped Muslim populations. The other Muslims who used to live in Bangui have virtually all fled, as have the inhabitants of many other towns and villages – many of them partially or totally destroyed -- across the western half of the country. There remain many tens of thousands of non-Muslim IDPs as well, mostly victims of the Seleka. The anti-Balaka, who originally came into existence as a reaction to the depredations of the Seleka, are now metamorphosing into criminal gangs, who in addition to continuing to hunt down Muslims are also starting to prey on Christians and other non-Muslims.

MISCA, the Sangaris and the humanitarian agencies are grappling with enormous problems, as well as with terrible dilemmas such as choosing between unwillingly aiding the “cleansing” of trapped Muslim populations, or leaving them – against their will – in places where they are in real danger of being slaughtered en masse.

The economy has collapsed, health care is virtually non-existent in many areas, as is education. As the Executive Director of the World Food Programme Ertharin Cousin pointed out here just yesterday, there is also a food crisis, with food security threatened by lack of funding, difficulties of access and a long rainy season likely to start in just a few weeks time.

The senior members of the transitional Government were extremely frank and open about the gargantuan task they face. The State's top leadership told me there is, in effect, no State: no coherent national army, no police, no justice system, hardly anywhere to detain criminals and no means of charging, prosecuting or convicting them. The so-called 'penal chain' is not only missing links, it is not functioning at all.

The country's only major prison, re-opened recently here in Bangui, has already experienced two very serious incidents: on one occasion, a mob burst in and lynched four Muslim prisoners. Then, two weeks ago, nine prisoners escaped – allegedly with the collusion of some of those charged with guarding them. Elsewhere, people apprehended with blood on their machetes and severed body parts in their hands, have been allowed to go free, because there is nowhere to detain them, and no means to charge them with the crimes they have clearly committed.

It was highly symbolic that, during my meeting with the Minister of Justice yesterday, there was no power. Although the lights eventually came back on, she described how she doesn't even have computers to record data concerning arrests, how prosecutors are threatened and at least one magistrate has been assassinated. There is, as a result, almost total impunity, no justice, no law and order apart from that provided by foreign troops. We discussed the possibility of bringing in some foreign judges and magistrates to help their local counterparts kick-start the justice system.

Everyone I have met has focused on the urgent need to restore law and order – particularly through deployment of trained police and gendarmes. However, with so few resources available even to pay their salaries, there seems to be little in the way of serious planning to ensure this not only happens, but happens quickly.

Over the past nine months, I have sent three different monitoring teams to CAR to document the human rights violations that have been taking place, and deficits that exist, and I am currently helping to reinforce the capacity of the human rights component in BINUCA, as well as providing support to the Commission of Inquiry on CAR which was set up by the Security Council in December and is now on the ground and operational. I have urged all my interlocutors to do their utmost to assist this very important body, which will play a key role in establishing accountability for the worst violations that have occurred since the beginning of the current crisis.

My monitoring team's most recent report, filed yesterday after a visit to Bambari, 350 kilometres north-east of Bangui, highlights some rare good news: the so called 'Bambari exception.' After the 5 December mass killings in Bangui, which then spread rapidly to other areas, Muslim and Christian religious leaders in Bambari made strenuous joint efforts to prevent divisions emerging among the town's mixed population, including by broadcasting messages of tolerance on the local radio station. In addition the town's current military leader has removed most weapons and taken a series of measures to reassure both communities, and has also repelled more radical ex-Seleka elements who tried to enter Bambari.

Nevertheless the situation there remains very fragile and nearby towns and villages have fared less well.

More positive signs include yesterday afternoon's discussions in the Transitional Parliament, during which some MPs, in their interaction with the Minister of Justice placed a strong focus on the need for human rights, and spelled out precisely what some of those key rights are, including everyone's right to life. This important and lengthy debate was broadcast live on the country's main radio station.

I believe there needs to be many more such highly visible efforts by national and local politicians and officials to ram home the message that human rights violations and rampant crime will no longer be tolerated; that all sectors of society, including minorities, have equal rights; and that reconciliation is vital for everyone if the country is to recover. In that regard, I was glad to learn from the Prime Minister that the Transitional Government is setting up both a Reconciliation Commission and a Permanent Commission on Dialogue.

He also committed to expediting the establishment of a National Human Rights Commission. National Human Rights Commissions are important independent bodies with specific powers, governed by an international set of standards, known as the Paris Principles, and I offered the services of my Office to help the Government ensure it is of a high standard from the outset.

But specific institutions such as these will find it very difficult to operate unless law and order and the justice system are restored, and displaced populations are able to swiftly return and rebuild their houses and their lives in full confidence that they will be properly protected by the State. There will be no political solution until these conditions are fulfilled.

The Central African Republic is paying a very heavy price for 50 years of extraordinarily bad governance. With fertile soil and valuable mineral resources, it should be rich. Instead, even before the current disaster, it was one of the poorest countries in the world. A country that, despite many rivers, and a lengthy rainy season, is still having to buy drinking water from its neighbours.

Amid the current catastrophe, there is a golden opportunity that must not be squandered. The Transitional Government must not only act decisively to ensure that the foundations of a new and healthier State are put in place, it must also act to ensure that the old order of corrupt governance does not re-emerge. It should not depend entirely on the international community to fill all the vacuums, because if it does there will never be a full recovery.

That said, I am deeply concerned by the slow response of the international community. The vital humanitarian aid effort is deplorably underfunded, with only 20 percent of requirements met so far. Human rights NGOs do not even have means of transport to travel to the countryside to find out what is going on. I urge States to respond quickly to the Secretary-General's appeal for a fully equipped force of 10,000 international peace-keepers and 2,000 police. In my meetings with MISCA and the Sangaris I have stressed the need for both current and future peace-keeping forces to abide by human rights, which will entail careful training and monitoring by commanders and contributing States.

In short, although CAR has received international attention, that attention is far from commensurate with the needs, and pales by comparison with other situations where international interventions have proved largely successful. Creating an effective justice system, prisons, police forces and other key State institutions, virtually from scratch, is a

massive and complex enterprise that cannot be done on the cheap. The international community seems to have forgotten some of the lessons it learned in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Rwanda, Kosovo and East Timor – to mention just a few.

Civil society organizations told me they rang the alarm bells long before the crisis turned into a calamity, but nobody listened. Despite some improvements on the security front, the alarm bells are still ringing. If we get it wrong again, by failing to support this country whole-heartedly in its time of need, we risk decades of instability and the creation of a new and fertile breeding ground for religious extremism, not just in CAR but in the wider region.

I cannot help thinking that if the Central African Republic were not a poor country hidden away in the heart of Africa, the terrible events that have taken place - and continue to take place - would have stimulated a far stronger and more dynamic reaction by the outside world. How many more children have to be decapitated, how many more women and girls will be raped, how many more acts of cannibalism must there be, before we really sit up and pay attention?

Thank you.