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WRITTEN TESTIMONY
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HEARING ON THE CRISIS IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC
Submitted to the
HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON AFRICA, GLOBAL HEALTH, GLOBAL
HUMAN RIGHTS AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

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I am Most Reverend Nestor-Désiré NONGO AZIAGBIA, bishop from the Diocese of Bossangoa, in the Central African Republic (CAR) and Vice President of the Central African Catholic Bishops' Conference. I want to thank you, Chairman Smith and, Ranking Member Bass, for the opportunity to testify before your Subcommittee. I ask that this written testimony be entered into the record.

I am a religious leader and a pastor to my diocese of about 623,000 people, 360,000 of whom are Catholic. Since early 2013, my diocese and its people have been at the epicenter of an unprecedented crisis. As I speak, more than 35,000 people have taken shelter in my diocesan compound living in horrible conditions to escape the deadly violence occurring just outside our walls. Zenit, a Catholic news service reports that about 2,000 homes have been destroyed in my diocese alone. Some estimate that about 440,000 people are displaced across the country, and no one knows how many people have died. The road south to the capital Bangui, over 200 miles away is deserted. Villagers have fled to escape the attacks, mass killings, rape, and plundering perpetrated by the roaming groups of Seleka militia. Fighting, the mass displacement and economic collapse have disrupted the agricultural planting and harvesting season. The World Food Program estimates that over 1 million people, almost one out of four Central Africans, face serious food insecurity. Seleka groups have also taken control over gold and diamond mines, the primary source of foreign exchange revenue.

The Central African Republic (CAR) is a country of 4.5 million people in the center of the African Continent. In March, CAR experienced a coup d'état led by Michel Djotodia. For its entire 63 year post-colonial history, CAR has been ruled by a series of

military coup leaders and negligent autocratic politicians who have plundered the country of its rich natural resources and neglected the needs of their people. As a result, CAR ranks near the bottom of United Nations Human Development Index (180 out of 186 countries). Life expectancy is 49 years. Adults have a mean average of only 3.5 years of education.

This current political crisis is, however, very different and more threatening to the country, its people and the surrounding region than past political upheavals. Before taking power, the current Interim President Djotodia led an alliance of four political parties, called Seleka (Alliance in the Sango language). For years Seleka opposed the rule of former President Francois Bozize. As a result of years of poor governance, corruption, a failed election, political deadlock and a series of broken peace deals, Seleka strengthened its rebel group forces from about 5,000 rebels to 25,000 when Michel Djotodia recruited large numbers of mercenary forces from Darfur, Sudan and southern Chad and took control of the country. At present, we believe the Chadian and Sudanese forces in Seleka make up 90% of the Seleka militia. These foreign mercenaries, who put President Djotodia in power, now run rampant across the country, attacking villages, stealing property and livestock, raping, abducting and killing many people and recruiting child soldiers. Although President Djotodia has formally dissolved Seleka in an attempt to end the violence, he has no formal army to enforce peace and security.

The four main groups of the Seleka militia have established control over different regions of CAR, setting up a *de facto* foreign occupation. Most of the Seleka forces do not speak the local language, come from different ethnic backgrounds, and are Muslim. They occupy a country that is 85% Christian and 12% Muslim. Traditionally, Christians and Muslims in CAR have enjoyed good relations. Seleka's violent attacks have targeted Christian homes, schools and places of worship while sparing local Muslim communities and mosques, often only a short distance away. Christian communities have now begun to set up self-defense militia to fight back. Sadly, there are reports that they are attacking Muslim communities in retribution. Thus, although the violent conflict started out as a response to poor governance and exclusion, and a battle over access to political and economic power, it has now taken on an additional and dangerous Muslim-Christian sectarian character that the country has never experienced.

The Central African Muslim and Christian communities are being divided by another particular aspect of this conflict. Seleka militia often raid villages to steal cattle, livestock and other property. Seleka militia men then pass the livestock to Central African Muslim herders to take care of because like them, herding is part of their shared culture. Inevitably, Christians see local Muslims herding the cattle that Seleka stole from them. This has led some Christians to believe the Central African Muslim community is in league with the Chadian and Sudanese mercenaries and is benefiting from Christian losses. This conflict and the grievances it is creating could create internal Muslim-Christian conflict that will persist even if the foreign mercenaries eventually return to their countries of origin.

Another important factor in this conflict is the presence of gold and diamonds in CAR. Seleka militia groups are already in control of gold and diamond mining areas. There are regular reports of attacks on mining communities in order to take control over mining operations. The potential revenue from this illegal mining will strengthen Seleka forces embed them more firmly in the country and create in CAR a 'conflict minerals' crisis similar to the situation in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The total absence of the rule of law and the presence of vast natural resource wealth could attract other outside militia groups, criminal networks, or even terrorist groups looking for a safe place to operate, new recruits and a source of financing for their operations. This is a formula for persistent regional instability by fueling militia activities in neighboring countries. This must be avoided at all cost.

For years before the coup d'état in March 2013, northern and northwest CAR have been havens for Chadian rebels and armed groups from Darfur in Sudan. In the last few years, the infamous Lord's Resistance Army has taken refuge in the Southeast of the country to find refuge from Ugandan army forces supported by American troops. They have also pillaged villages, killed innocent civilians and forcefully abducted children into their ranks.

In this situation of chaos, the Catholic Church stands as virtually the only national institution that still functions. In my diocese alone we run 54 schools and seven social welfare centers. I and my staff are organizing care for over 35,000 people. Archbishop Dieudonné NZAPALAINGA of Bangui, the capital of CAR, has united with the President of the Central African Islamic Community and the President of the Evangelical Churches in a religious platform to call on the President and Seleka leaders to end the violence. They are also urging national Muslim and Christian leaders, and their communities, to refrain from violence and counter attacks.

The Church Caritas institutions have mobilized assistance from international organizations like Caritas Internationalis and Catholic Relief Services to feed the displaced. We are also helping people to restart their farms by providing seeds and tools. Lastly, the diocese of Bangassou in the LRA area and CRS are helping villages to develop safety and security plans to provide early warning of LRA movements and help people avoid attacks.

In September I traveled to New York with a delegation of Central African civil society leaders to meet UN officials and country missions to the UN to raise awareness of the crisis and to plead for assistance. I and the delegation also came to Washington where the National Endowment for Democracy, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and CRS staff organized meetings with Congressional leaders, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and the State Department.

In October, Archbishop NZAPALAINGA from the Archdiocese of Bangui traveled to Geneva to address the United Nations Human Rights Council to raise

awareness of the crisis and to stimulate a mobilization of donor countries to help us bring peace to our country.

I have returned to the United States now to urge you, the United States Government to provide immediate assistance. First, the CAR urgently needs international support to end the violence. The United States working with France, the UN and the African Union should fund an increase of MISCA troops to secure the entire country (the size of Texas) and equip the force to compel Seleka forces to disarm, demobilize and reintegrate into society, or to return to their home countries. This force should be put under a UN Chapter VII mandate to ensure impartiality and the ability to stop violence and save innocent civilian lives.

The UN mandate and operational control is important for two reasons. First it is the need to prevent regional country forces in MISCA from pursuing their national interests over the interests of the CAR people. A large portion of the MISCA troops are from Chad. Chadian government troops protected former President Bozize while he was in power. The Chadian's withdrawal permitted Seleka forces to take control over the entire country. In addition, the largest portion of the Seleka forces are also Chadian.

It is our hope that the UN will be able to select MISCA troops from neutral African countries outside of our immediate region and also monitor all troops' operations to ensure impartiality. The second reason for a UN mandate is the hope that the UN will instill greater discipline and effectiveness.

My second request is that the United States and its partners should fund humanitarian assistance such as food, household goods, health care and agricultural inputs to allow Central Africans to return to their villages and rebuild their lives. A second phase of assistance would help people to rebuild their homes, promote societal reconciliation programs and help the government to re-establish essential social services like schools and health clinics. The Church has a close and effective partnership with Catholic Relief Services on the ground and we urge you to fund projects that take full advantage of the benefits of this productive partnership.

Third, the United States and its partners should fund the transition process to a legitimate, democratically elected government. We need an independent electoral commission to prepare the electoral voter rolls, establish the polling stations and then organize effective monitoring programs to ensure that the electoral campaign, the election day process and the vote counting are done in a free and fair way.

We will need many years of sustained assistance to rebuild government administrative, judicial and social services and professional, well-trained military and police forces under the full authority of civilian leaders. We request the International Criminal Court to investigate the most serious cases of human rights abuses.

We urge you in a particular way to extend ample assistance to civil society and faith-based groups so they can protect the peoples' civil rights and ensure government leaders serve the common good. At this difficult time, the Church is the only national institution that is still operating and serving the needs of the victims of violence and

destruction. It is also the only institution big and trusted enough to unite religious leaders to speak truth to the interim government and hopefully be a positive influence on its policies and actions.

In closing, we urge the United States to rally the international community in our moment of need. This is clearly a moment when you can be a modern day Good Samaritan to the Central African people who have fallen prey to perpetrators of violence and destruction. Central Africans look up to the United States as the leader of the community of nations. You are a country and a people who many years ago fought to establish your freedom from a foreign power. You endured a brutal civil war and reunited as one nation to rise to the world power that you are.

We hope and pray that the United States will rise to this call and help us rebuild a new, free and democratic Central African Republic.



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