



Making the Central African Republic's Latest Peace Agreement Stick

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Headquarters

International Crisis Group

Avenue Louise 149 • 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: +32 2 502 90 38 • Fax: +32 2 502 50 38

brussels@crisisgroup.org

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Principal Findings

What's new? In February, the Central African Republic's government signed an agreement with armed groups that control large swathes of the country, committing to integrating some groups' fighters into new army units and their leaders into government. The deal has galvanised international support, but violence continues in the provinces.

Why does it matter? The government, African Union and UN have invested heavily in this agreement, which has the buy-in of neighbours. With strong follow-up in-country there is a chance of starting to reverse six years of widespread violence.

What should be done? The government should set clear benchmarks for armed group behaviour; it should eject from government leaders of groups that fail to meet them. The government and international actors should support local peace initiatives. Chad and Sudan should use their influence over armed groups to end their abuses.

Executive Summary

Four months after the government of the Central African Republic (CAR) signed an African Union (AU)-sponsored peace agreement with fourteen armed groups, implementation remains patchy. The mixed units it envisages, which would comprise armed groups' fighters alongside national armed forces, could help catalyse those group's demobilisation, but setting them up is proving hard. A new government, which has awarded armed groups important national and local posts, has proven controversial with a population that wants above all a reduction in violence and predation. Some accommodation with powerful groups is likely necessary, but the government and its international allies should establish benchmarks that would condition armed group representatives' tenure in government posts on changes in behaviour. They should also support local peace initiatives, which have had some success in forging truces, resolving disputes and reducing bloodshed in provinces where armed groups operate. International actors should maintain pressure on CAR's neighbours to use their sway over those groups to end abuses.

The agreement, negotiated in Khartoum and signed in Bangui on 6 February, is at least the sixth deal with the fourteen armed groups since some of them seized the Central African capital in 2013, provoking a crisis that endures today. Brokered by the AU, with the involvement of CAR's neighbours, it followed successful efforts by the regional body's top diplomats to bring under AU auspices a parallel Russian and Sudanese initiative, which in mid-2018 threatened to fracture international mediation efforts. Like previous such agreements, the deal lays out the conflict's main causes and commits the parties to resolving disputes peacefully and the armed groups to disarming. It also contains two more significant provisions. First, it creates Special Mixed Security Units, merging some combatants from armed groups with army formations. Secondly, CAR's president, Faustin-Archange Touadéra, committed to an "inclusive government", understood by AU mediators and the armed groups themselves to mean giving those groups greater representation.

Implementation of those provisions has run into early challenges. The mixed security units could help kick-start the armed groups' demobilisation, with some fighters integrating into the army and others returning to civilian life. But the parties' divergent understandings of the units' command structures and the armed groups' reluctance to commit fighters to longer-term disarmament has hampered their formation. The inclusive government has proven especially controversial. On 3 March, President Touadéra's new prime minister named a cabinet which gave the armed groups few positions, all at relatively junior levels. The groups rejected this and threatened to walk out on the agreement as a whole. After an emergency meeting with armed group leaders hosted by the AU at its Addis Ababa headquarters, the prime minister named another government at the end of March. This second effort gave the armed groups multiple cabinet posts as well as local government positions in areas they control. Many in Bangui reacted angrily to what they see as an unacceptable concession to armed groups.

Thus far, the deal has brought some dividends. It has renewed international attention to CAR and united diplomats behind a single mediation effort. Including

neighbours, particularly Chad, in the talks and on a committee set up to monitor the agreement's implementation could induce them to persuade armed groups that recruit and resupply in their countries to rein in abuses. Given that a few years ago those groups were demanding amnesties and threatening to march on Bangui, simply getting them to the table was an achievement.

Whether the deal has reduced violence is, however, unclear. A lull in major fighting for some months after the deal was signed may well have been due to the rainy season's onset. The daily grind of violence in the provinces has scarcely abated. On 21 May, one of the Agreement's signatories perpetrated attacks that killed dozens of civilians in the north west. Moreover, beyond calling for disarmament, the agreement is silent on how to curtail clashes among armed groups, which are more frequent than fighting between them and government soldiers or UN peacekeepers. Indeed, it left many details to be worked out later. In the eyes of many in Bangui, therefore, its main impact thus far has been to reward predatory militants with government slots, for little apparent return.

While some accommodation with the most powerful armed groups is necessary, the government and AU should at a minimum demand that they go some way toward meeting their side of the bargain in return for a share of government power. The risk cited by some AU officials that such an approach could lead armed groups to exit the deal altogether and escalate violence appears overblown. At least the larger armed groups are motivated less by retaining slots in government than by holding onto territory, which they would still do even if losing their government posts. Risks can also be mitigated though an approach that sees the government and its international partners complement national-level dialogue with local peace initiatives.

The following steps would help ensure that the Agreement leads to an improvement in conditions on the ground:

- ❑ The government, in concert with the Agreement's guarantors and the UN, and in agreement with the armed groups if possible, should seek to establish benchmarks that those groups must meet in order to retain their government positions. If reaching consensus proves impossible, the government and international actors should impose their own, based on the Agreement's terms, but in more detail and with timelines attached. Benchmarks could start with armed groups reducing violence, allowing state officials to deploy to provinces and permitting humanitarian organisations to work unimpeded. Over time they should also include steps toward demobilisation, including participation in the mixed security units. Importantly, such benchmarks would also embed the principle of reciprocity in negotiations.
- ❑ Where their uneven presence on the ground allows, the government and its international partners should support local peace committees that in some provinces have been able to arrange truces and resolve disputes among armed groups. The prefectural committees created by the Agreement to implement its provisions locally should build on these efforts.

- The government should step up its public communications, not only concerning February's agreement, but also its wider approach to negotiations. It should explain to a sceptical public that some concessions to armed groups are necessary, but that such concessions are contingent on those groups reducing violence and taking steps toward disarmament.
- Building on recent joint working visits to Bangui, the AU, in concert with the country's two other main partners, the EU and the UN, should maintain pressure on neighbours to take back foreign fighters following disarmament in CAR, and to use their influence over armed groups to persuade them to reduce violence, allow the state to return to areas they control and eventually demobilise. The AU and UN in particular should seek to reinvigorate bilateral diplomatic channels between CAR and each of its neighbours, particularly Chad and Sudan. Russia, which is increasingly involved in CAR, should lend its support to efforts to demobilise armed groups and maintain pressure on those of CAR's neighbours with which it has close ties.

Nairobi/Brussels, 18 June 2019

Making the Central African Republic's Latest Peace Agreement Stick

I. Introduction

On 6 February, in Bangui, the Central African Republic (CAR) government and fourteen armed groups signed a political agreement negotiated over the previous ten days in Khartoum.¹ Mediated by the African Union (AU), the deal is the latest in a long line of agreements between the government and armed groups since a coalition of those groups, the Seleka, overran the capital Bangui in March 2013 and installed Michel Djotodia as president.² Djotodia officially disbanded the Seleka shortly afterward, though Seleka groups' continued predation prompted the formation of self-defence militias known as anti-balaka. After a meeting of Central African leaders in early 2014, Djotodia was forced to resign and Catherine Samba-Panza became transitional president. A UN mission, the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in CAR (MINUSCA), deployed in March that year. Diverse national actors then participated in the 2015 Bangui Forum, a national reconciliation meeting, which led to the creation of a national disarmament committee; most of the fourteen groups that signed the recent deal joined this committee.³

Around half of the fourteen are formerly associated with or part of the Seleka coalition. The largest of the ex-Seleka groups, notably the Popular Front for the Renewal of CAR (FPRC), the Patriotic Movement for CAR (MPC), the Union for Peace in CAR (UPC), the Return, Reclaim and Rehabilitation (3R) movement and the Democratic Front of Central African People (FDPC) (the latter two less closely associated with Seleka), are thousands strong and control tracts of CAR's centre north and north west.

Most ex-Seleka groups comprise a mix of fighters and mercenaries who have long operated around the border areas of northern CAR, later joined by, but also clashing with, groups purporting to represent herders. Some have their roots as much in Sudan,

¹ The full text of the agreement is available in a letter from the UN Secretary-General to the Security Council. UN Security Council, "Letter Dated 14 February 2019 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council", 15 February 2019.

² Meetings that have all resulted in some form of deal have been held either between armed groups or between armed groups and government representatives in Libreville (2013), Brazzaville (2014); Nairobi (2015); Bangui (2015); Rome (2017) and Khartoum (2018 and 2019). The meetings' precise composition has varied but each deal's provisions have largely stayed the same. For background see Crisis Group Africa Report N°253, *Avoiding the Worst in Central African Republic*, 28 September 2017.

³ See "Accord sur les principes de désarmement, démobilisation, réintégration et rapatriement (DDRR) et d'intégration dans les corps en uniforme de l'Etat centrafricain entre le gouvernement de transition et les groupes armés", Bangui, 10 May 2015. See also Appendix D which provides a full list of the armed groups involved. Of the groups that signed the recent deal, ten joined the disarmament committee. Two others, the 3R movement and MPC, emerged as warring alliances shifted in later years and were allowed to join the original group. The fourteen were completed when both the Ngaïssona anti-balaka group and the Révolution et Justice group split in two, with all four new factions joining the committee.

Chad and Cameroon as they do in CAR. Some of their leaders retain links with officials, traders and herders in those neighbouring countries, have extensive cross-border cattle businesses and have reportedly made large fortunes from control of grazing and the cattle trade.⁴ In common with populations in border areas and pastoralist communities, many ex-Seleka members' nationality is unclear, and many CAR citizens regard them as foreign. Some of their leaders grew up abroad.

Since 2013, much of the fighting across CAR has pitted ex-Seleka against anti-balaka groups, as well as competing ex-Seleka groups against each other. Violence between ex-Seleka and anti-balaka groups has hardened identities and raised tensions in some parts of the country between herders and traders, who are mostly Muslim and whom many people regard as complicit in ex-Seleka violence, and the wider population. If violence somewhat abated immediately following the election of the current president, Faustin Archange Touadéra, in January 2016, it flared up again in 2017 and 2018, with groups struggling for control of local economies, particularly taxation of trade, cattle and mining sites. Human rights groups and the UN say both ex-Seleka and anti-balaka are responsible for atrocities against civilians, thousands of whom have lost their lives and hundreds of thousands of whom have been displaced by fighting.⁵ The mediators behind the 6 February deal hoped that the agreement would bring a durable end to the crisis and reduce violence.

This report examines the build-up to the Khartoum negotiations, the provisions of the deal itself, its strengths and shortcomings, the parties' different perspectives on it and challenges to its implementation. It offers ideas as to how the CAR government and its international partners can build on the deal by remodelling their engagement in the country, supporting local peace initiatives and reviving regional diplomacy. It is based on research in Bangui in January, March and April 2019, as well as in Addis Ababa, Brussels and New York, and draws on Crisis Group's extensive previous reporting on CAR since the crisis emerged in 2012.⁶

⁴ Crisis Group interview, civil society expert on armed groups, Bangui, May 2019. See also Emmanuel Chauvin, « La guerre en Centrafrique à l'ombre du Tchad : Une escalade conflictuelle régionale? », AFD, March 2018. On the international links of armed groups, see UN Security Council, "Letter dated 14 December 2018 from the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic established pursuant to resolution 2399 (2018) addressed to the President of the Security Council", 14 December 2018.

⁵ On armed groups' atrocities, see "Central African Republic: Rebels Executing Civilians, Peacekeepers Should Protect Displaced People's Camp", Human Rights Watch, October 2018; and UN Security Council, "Letter dated 14 December 2018 from the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic", op. cit. For background on armed groups' behaviour, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°219, *The Central African Crisis: From Predation to Stabilisation*, 17 June 2014 and "Central African Republic: A Conflict Mapping", International Peace Information Service and Danish Institute for International Studies, 2018.

⁶ This reporting is archived at the Crisis Group website.

II. The Road to Khartoum

A. Violence in the Provinces and Tensions in the Capital

The 6 February Political Agreement followed several months of deteriorating security in CAR's centre, north and west, during which armed groups fought each other and, to a lesser extent, UN peacekeepers and the national armed forces. Patterns of violence have changed little over the past several years, though the bigger ex-Seleka groups appear to have extended their reach and acquired more arms.⁷ Civilians continue to be the principal victims, either because they resist predation or because armed groups use collective punishment to enforce territorial control, including by targeting rival ethnic and religious communities.⁸

Mounting insecurity over the latter half of 2018 was marked by two particularly violent confrontations, both involving large ex-Seleka groups. On 31 October, FPRC and MPC fighters attacked the town of Batangafo, burning and looting large parts of it over the next six days and destroying internally displaced people (IDP) sites that they believed sheltered anti-balaka fighters. To counter the FPRC offensive, anti-balaka groups deployed additional forces to the town, sparking further clashes that killed fifteen people and left 29 injured and 20,000 displaced.⁹

The second incident took place on 15 November, when the UPC ex-Seleka group attacked the town of Alindao seeking to punish anti-balaka groups for violence, including attacks on herders that had occurred previously outside the town. Much as the FPRC and MPC had done in Batangafo, the UPC targeted IDP camps and exacted collective punishment on Christians, whom they perceived as supporting anti-balaka groups. A UN investigation reported 112 dead.¹⁰ Some locals and IDPs accused UN peacekeepers present in Alindao of failing to protect them.¹¹

The relationship among political factions in Bangui also deteriorated ahead of the Khartoum talks. On 26 October, parliamentarians voted to remove from office National Assembly speaker, Karim Meckassoua. Given that Meckassoua was a vocal opponent of the president, some politicians and civic leaders, and certainly Meck-

⁷ Crisis Group interview, Central African civil society specialist knowledgeable about armed groups' activities, Bangui, March 2019. See also UN Security Council, "Letter dated 14 December 2018 from the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic", op. cit.

⁸ "Central African Republic: A Conflict Mapping", op. cit.

⁹ "Unprotected: Summary of Internal Review on the October 31st events in Batangafo, Central African Republic", MSF, February 2019 and "Human Rights Report on the Batangafo Incidents", MINUSCA, November 2018.

¹⁰ See "Attack on the Displaced Persons' Camp in Alindao, Basse-Kotto Prefecture, on 15 November 2018: Breaches of International Humanitarian Law and Atrocity Crimes Committed by the UPC and Anti-Balaka Associated Militias", MINUSCA, December 2018.

¹¹ Between 21 and 30 November, several leaders including Prime Minister Simplicie Sarandji, National Assembly President Laurent Ngon Baba, Bassangoa Bishop Nestor-Désiré Nongo Aziagbia and Cardinal Dieudonné Nzapalainga criticised the UN force for its passivity in face of the violence. See « Mgr Dieudonné Nzapalainga : 'Une guerre de positionnement a commencé en Centrafrique' », *Le Monde*, 30 November 2018. The UN report of enquiry notes strong local criticism of the UN troops present in the town at the time of fighting but does not conclude that they were at fault. A UN official argued to Crisis Group that in the case of Alindao, the UN force could not have reacted more firmly without putting IDPs' safety further at risk. Crisis Group interview, Bangui, May 2019.

assoua himself, viewed the vote as an attempt to silence a critic; parliamentarians, including some of the president's opponents, reject this interpretation and claim that Meckassoua was ousted for mismanaging assembly finances.¹² Some Muslims, who saw Meckassoua as their representative, and especially those from the PK5 neighbourhood in Bangui that he represents in parliament, took to the streets to protest his dismissal. On 29 October, the National Assembly nominated as speaker Laurent Ngon-Baba, also a Muslim, but one seen as close to Touadéra.

B. *International Developments*

In June 2017, CAR's international partners, meeting in Brussels, agreed that the AU would lead international efforts to mediate between the government and armed groups. To that end, the AU adopted a framework plan in Libreville in July 2017 and established a panel of mediators that September.¹³ Over the following year, the panel met twice with the fourteen armed groups, and had contacts with individual groups, in what AU officials describe as considerable preparatory work.¹⁴ In mid-August 2018, the groups submitted a list of over one hundred demands on issues ranging from development in areas under their control to the inclusion in government of communities they claim to represent. Having pressed the groups to reduce – albeit only modestly – the scope of these demands, the panel transmitted them to President Touadéra. It also met Chadian President Idriss Déby, who enjoys some sway over powerful ex-Seleka leaders, and former CAR presidents Francois Bozizé and Michel Djotodia, who retain influence over anti-balaka and ex-Seleka respectively.

As AU efforts to advance negotiations and calm violence stuttered forward, Russia significantly stepped up its own involvement in CAR. In October 2017, President Touadéra accepted Moscow's offer of weapons and training for the country's armed forces.¹⁵ Throughout 2018, an unconfirmed number of Russian army officers and several hundred employees of the Russian private security firm Wagner deployed to CAR, while a Russian national, Valery Zakharov, acted as Touadéra's security adviser. Touadéra subsequently replaced his Rwandan UN police close protection unit with a Russian team. Bangui and Moscow signed a military cooperation agreement in August 2018.

Russia's influence extended into contacts with the armed groups, particularly those in CAR's north. Working mainly out of Sudan, Russian citizens – whether officials or Wagner employees is unclear – held two meetings in Khartoum (on 10-11 July and 28 August 2018) with four groups, including the larger ex-Seleka groups, the first in the presence of a CAR government representative. The second meeting took place on

¹² Crisis Group interviews, politicians, Bangui, March 2019. « Centrafrique : Karim Meckassoua face à Faustin-Archange Touadéra, les dessous d'une lutte », *Jeune Afrique*, 27 October 2018.

¹³ See Crisis Group Report, *Avoiding the Worst in Central African Republic*, op. cit.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, AU officials, Addis Ababa and Bangui, May 2019.

¹⁵ In August 2017, France requested an exemption from the UN sanctions regime on CAR for the delivery to Bangui of weapons seized off the coast of Somalia in 2016. Russia vetoed the exemption request, which had the backing of other Security Council members. In October, Russia requested an exemption for their own delivery, which the Security Council unanimously granted. See « Centrafrique : Moscou en embuscade », *Jeune Afrique*, 26 August 2018; and "How Russia moved into Central Africa", Reuters, 17 October 2018.

the day the AU panel had planned to meet with armed groups in Bouar in western CAR. The armed groups' leaders went to Khartoum while sending deputies to Bouar, in an apparent snub to the AU.

Russia's motives for deepening its involvement in CAR and building ties to the armed groups are disputed. At least one Russian company has acquired mineral prospecting rights in CAR; insofar as armed groups control most mineral sites, some observers point to Russian economic interests.¹⁶ On the other hand, several CAR politicians and foreign officials argue that Russia is motivated mostly by geostrategic interest, and seeks to leverage its security expertise to gain African support, undercut European rivals, consolidate relations with Khartoum and affirm its global standing.¹⁷

The government, impatient that more Western support to the security sector was not forthcoming, gratefully received Moscow's. Throughout 2018, President Touadéra maintained that the Khartoum talks were part of the AU initiative, but in fact did nothing to unify or coordinate them with the AU's efforts. He seemed content to allow Russia's parallel initiatives to proceed. Central African citizens seem to broadly appreciate Moscow's support for the army.¹⁸ Russians also built relations with the armed groups, though by late 2018, Moscow's increased engagement with CAR's armed forces, including deploying with them outside Bangui, had strained those ties.¹⁹

The international sponsors of the African initiative were less enthusiastic about the August 2018 talks in Khartoum. Western officials criticised them for generating tensions and both competing with and undermining the AU's initiative, which itself was strongly supported by the EU and member states.²⁰ The dispute spilled over into UN Security Council discussions in November 2018. Russian diplomats insisted that the Council welcome Moscow's role in Khartoum, while France wanted to simply note that the Khartoum process complemented the AU initiative. Paris also resisted having the Council authorise the deployment of Russian-trained troops without prior vetting by EU trainers. A subsequent delay in the Security Council's renewal of the UN mission's mandate reportedly was mostly due to a procedural hold-up within the American system.²¹ Still, the Russia-France dispute complicated united action on CAR, with Moscow accusing Paris of treating the country as a colony. Russia and

¹⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, international expert on security in CAR, April 2019; Clement Lobeze, « Retour de la Russie en RCA : entre multiples intérêts et lutte d'influence », GRIP, 9 August 2018.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, leading politician, Bangui, March 2019; UN official, Bangui, January 2019; EU official, Brussels, April 2019.

¹⁸ This sentiment has been evident on social media and in the Central African press. Also Crisis Group interviews, politicians, Bangui, January and March 2019.

¹⁹ On contacts between Russian nationals and armed groups: Crisis Group telephone interview, international expert on security in CAR, April 2019; Crisis Group interview, African diplomat, Bangui, March 2019. France 24 filmed exchanges between Russians and members of the FPC armed group in a documentary broadcast in July 2018. On CAR's government welcoming Russian support and on Russia's increased engagement outside Bangui alongside CAR's national army: Crisis Group interview, UN official, Bangui, February 2019; and a declaration by the CAR defence minister in « Le projet de loi portant ratification de l'Accord de défense entre la Centrafrique et la Russie voté par les parlementaires », RJDH, 14 December 2018.

²⁰ « Centrafrique: Le Drian estime qu'il n'y a pas de place pour l'initiative de paix menée par la Russie », *Jeune Afrique*, 25 September 2018; « L'émissaire de l'ONU souhaite la 'transparence' en Centrafrique », VOA, 28 September 2018.

²¹ Crisis Group correspondence, Security Council member, 17 May 2019.

China abstained on the resolution's final text, which did not welcome the Russian initiative.²²

For all the controversy they generated, the Russian-initiated talks nonetheless galvanised the AU. Throughout 2018, the UN and European powers pressured the AU commission to move faster and avoid being outflanked. The AU reacted in September, first through a Peace and Security Commission meeting and then a visit by Commission Chair Moussa Faki to Bangui, aiming to incorporate the Russian-Sudanese talks into the AU initiative. AU Peace and Security Commissioner Smail Chergui continued the diplomatic push. Chergui, who previously served as Algeria's ambassador to Moscow, engaged in intense shuttle diplomacy to gain Khartoum's support for the AU initiative and get it to host an AU-led mediation meeting, with implicit Russian support.²³ His efforts culminated in a joint visit in early January 2019 to Bangui with the UN's top peacekeeping official, Pierre Lacroix. Shortly after that meeting, President Touadéra announced his government's participation in the AU-led talks to be held in Khartoum that month.

²² Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, New York, November 2018. "Russia, China abstain on U.N. Central Africa vote, unhappy with France", Reuters, 14 December 2018. See also Evans Cinq Mars, "Action for Peacekeeping: Reform Comes Too Late for Civilians in the Central African Republic", CIVIC, 13 December 2018.

²³ AU Commission Chair Moussa Faki was Chadian foreign minister during the worst points of CAR's crisis in 2013-2014. Some politicians in Bangui regard him with suspicion.

III. The Political Agreement

CAR government officials and representatives of the fourteen groups duly gathered in Khartoum from 24 January onward. They met at times face to face, while the AU Commission team led by Chergui shuttled among them to solve disputes. Key international partners (the U.S., the EU, Russia and the UN), mediation bodies (the AU panel, St Egidio and the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue) and national civil society and parliamentary representatives attended as observers, not engaging in formal discussions but consulted by the AU team over key blockage points.²⁴ Less than a fortnight later, on 5 February, the government and the armed groups initialled the Agreement, in the presence of Lacroix, AU Commission chairperson Moussa Faki and Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir. The UN then flew the parties to Bangui; it and the AU considered it more apt for the parties to sign the agreement in-country, which they did on 6 February, with President Touadéra signing on the government's behalf.

A. *The Agreement*

The Agreement lays out broad statements of principle that largely reflect those in previous peace deals. It underlines the suffering caused by the war; the need to tackle the political and social marginalisation not only of women, youth and under-represented minorities but also of entire regions; the parties' rejection of political manipulation of ethnicity and religion and of the use of armed violence for political ends; and their respect for the country's constitution and territorial unity. Armed groups commit to disband, though the Agreement provides little detail about what that would actually entail. It also includes reforms that reinforce decentralisation and provide special status for former presidents, a concession to armed groups still supportive of Bozizé and Djotodia. It calls for the reactivation of bilateral commissions on pastoralism between CAR and its neighbours ("states of the region") that largely have lain dormant over recent years.²⁵

The Agreement contains three particularly significant elements. First, the president committed to form an "inclusive government". While inclusion in itself is hardly divisive, in this case it was understood – at least by the armed groups and the AU – to mean offering far more armed group members government posts than before (some already held minor positions), a proposition many Central Africans regard warily.²⁶

Secondly, it notes the possibility of legal sanction against those who continue to use violence and states that the parties "reject the idea of impunity". The govern-

²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, two observer participants at the talks, Bangui, January and March 2019.

²⁵ For background on the setting up and early functioning of these commissions, see Crisis Group Report, *Avoiding the Worst in Central African Republic*, op. cit. The relevant parts of the Agreement are in Appendix E.

²⁶ Crisis Group interviews, civil society activists and politicians, Bangui, March 2019. Some participants in the 2015 Bangui forum were critical of the previous practice of including armed groups in government and thereby relaxing the fight against impunity. Crisis Group interviews, civil society actors, Bangui and provincial capitals, 2015. See also Crisis Group Commentary, "Central African Republic: Four Priorities for the New President", 10 May 2016.

ment and AU point to this text as a victory against armed groups' repeated calls for amnesty.²⁷ It came in the context of advances over the previous months in efforts to hold perpetrators of major crimes accountable. In October and December 2018, security forces in Bangui and Paris arrested and transferred to the International Criminal Court two anti-balaka members. That same month, Bangui's criminal court convicted four ex-Seleka members of association with criminals and weapons possession and sentenced them to 20 years of hard labour.²⁸ The country's Special Criminal Court, created in mid-2015 to deal with serious crimes, and including both national and foreign judges, finally held its inaugural session in October 2018 and is formulating its investigation strategy. The Agreement urged that CAR accelerate its formation of a long-planned Truth, Justice, Reconciliation and Reparation Commission. That commission held its first consultations on 6 June.²⁹

In reality, however, the country still has no functioning justice system. Even those who are arrested often are released for lack of investigative capacity. The armed groups' most powerful leaders are thus highly unlikely to be held accountable any time soon for crimes they may have perpetrated during the war, notwithstanding the Agreement's rejection of impunity.

Lastly, the Agreement creates Mixed Special Security Units, arguably its main innovation. These were supposed to have been established within an overly tight timeframe of 60 days from signing and last for an initial two years. Yet the EU, UN and AU are still working to set up and finance them; as of early June, the main stumbling block was reportedly that some armed groups had either failed to provide their lists of fighters to join the groups or produced incomplete or inflated ones.³⁰ The units should include both armed group members and the national armed forces, under the latter's command. Participants from armed groups are to be vetted and undergo a short training. UN officials hope that the mixed security units can help kick-start the UN-backed national Disarmament, Demobilisation, Reintegration and Repatriation (DDRR) program, which was officially launched in December 2018 and should see a few hundred armed group members training for the army, while others return to civilian life.³¹

²⁷ « RCA : l'accord de paix signé à Bangui entre le gouvernement et 14 groupes armés », RFI, 6 February, 2019. Crisis Group interviews, AU officials, May 2019.

²⁸ Alfred Yekatom, (alias "Rambo") was arrested in Bangui and transferred to the ICC on 17 November 2018 and Patrice-Edouard Ngaïssona was arrested in France and transferred to the ICC on 12 December. On the domestic cases, see « Centrafrique : Quatre accusés proches de l'UPC condamnés par la Cour Criminelle à 20 ans des travaux forcés », RJDH, 20 August 2018.

²⁹ The Commission, planned since the 2015 Bangui forum, is intended to gather testimony and produce recommendations concerning national reconciliation. For background, see « La commission vérité centrafricaine patine », Justiceinfo.net, 6 May 2019.

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, diplomat, Bangui, May 2019.

³¹ The current DDRR program is the latest iteration of a long line of demilitarisation programs stretching back almost unbroken to the early 2000s. While the agreement does not formally link the mixed security units to DDRR, this was the intention of the UN mission that leads international disarmament efforts and, according to the Agreement, will support the units. Crisis Group interviews, UN staff, Bangui, February and March 2019. The president has committed to taking 10 per cent of new army recruits from armed groups, but this commitment remains hypothetical so long as armed groups resist demobilising. The integration of former armed group members into the army in any case remains problematic, due to required education levels and to armed groups' demands

Such mixed security units will need to overcome numerous challenges if they are to help propel disarmament. Most armed groups face little pressure to demobilise and have little incentive to do so, while the armed forces – the other component of the units – are barely past basic training, with even the modest 1,300 troops deployed outside Bangui (as of March) lacking equipment and supply lines. Even if the mixed units are formed, the process faces several risks: that it not be accompanied by wider disarmament; that former armed group members undergo only minimal if any training; and that they not be overseen by the army or UN.³² Armed group commanders could therefore retain de facto control over their former combatants, raising the possibility that they will continue to prey on civilians, only now in army uniforms. This problem is compounded by the fact that neither the EU nor the UN is mandated to train the units; officials in both organisations are currently looking for ways of offering indirect support.³³ Moreover, as detailed below, the parties have widely divergent understandings of what the units entail.

Responsibility for enforcing the deal rests with different bodies. The Agreement mandates members of the African Panel of Mediators – the AU; sub-regional groups (namely the Economic Community of Central African States, or ECCAS, and the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, or ICGLR); as well as Angola, the Republic of the Congo, Gabon and Chad – to “verify the implementation of the agreement by the parties”.

It also creates two national-level and a number of local committees to oversee implementation. The first, the Executive Monitoring Committee, co-chaired by the AU and the government, includes all parties to the agreement plus other stakeholders (“les forces vives de la nation”, in the French original) and was officially launched on 15 May. The second is a working-level National Implementation Committee, which comprises government officials and armed group representatives.³⁴ The Agreement also sets up prefectural committees, headed by the country’s sixteen prefects and tasked, ambitiously, with evaluating the Agreement’s implementation, arbitrating disagreements among parties and even resolving military disputes. Few of these are yet in place – understandably given the state’s weakness in the provinces.

The Agreement does not fully clarify relations between the prefectural committees and already existing Local Peace Committees. Some informal fusion of the two structures is likely; indeed, they will draw from the same pool of local civic and religious leaders. The peace committees number in the dozens in around half the country’s provinces and were established by civil society groups, religious platforms and international NGOs, often with UN support, starting in 2012. The government later formalised and replicated their work across the country, meaning they now operate

that they enter the army at their current self-proclaimed “ranks”. Crisis Group interview, international official working on DDR, Bangui, March 2019.

³² Crisis Group telephone interview, senior UN official, May 2019.

³³ Crisis Group interviews, EU and UN officials, Brussels and Bangui, April and May 2019.

³⁴ These committees could play an important role in coordinating support and monitoring progress (see below) but they also run the risk, as has been the case in the past, of producing a cluster of committees in Bangui with little traction over the country’s conflict dynamics. Crisis Group interview, donor official, Brussels, April 2019.

with varying degrees of official involvement.³⁵ In essence, they serve as forums for communities to air grievances and resolve disputes, including those involving armed groups. While they often struggle in remote areas or are ignored as armed groups divide up territory and spoils, they have, overall, been valuable in helping secure local ceasefires and peace deals and resolving land disputes, thefts and kidnappings.³⁶ The new prefectural committees should aim to build on their achievements rather than pushing them aside.

B. *The Aftermath*

CAR's international partners mostly welcomed the AU-brokered Agreement, though some officials were sceptical. The UN mission, the Security Council, the World Bank and the EU all expressed support, with the EU undertaking to raise new money for its implementation.³⁷ Though working-level international officials tended to see the attention and support of donors and partners as positive, those directly involved in implementing its key provisions express concern that doing so will be hard and warn that armed group leaders have little incentive to adhere to its terms.³⁸

The government's early steps proved controversial. On 25 February, President Touadéra named Firmin Ngrebada, his chief of staff and main negotiator in Khartoum, as prime minister. In turn, on 3 March, Ngrebada named a new government of 37 ministers that retained all top ministers (finance, foreign affairs, interior and justice) from the previous cabinet while offering relatively minor positions to six armed groups – five ex-Seleka and one anti-balaka.³⁹ Unhappy at the small number and low level of positions, the ex-Seleka groups swiftly rejected the new government. One of the larger groups, the FPRC, refused to take up its allotted position. Another, the FDPC, announced that it would pull out of the agreement and set up roadblocks on the country's main supply road to Cameroon for four days to protest not being offered government slots.⁴⁰ Civil society and opposition parties also criticised their near-absence from the supposedly inclusive government.⁴¹ Ngrebada's assurances that he would make further appointments in the national administration did nothing to alleviate the crisis.

³⁵ « Note conceptuelle relative à la mise en place des comités locaux de paix et de réconciliation en République centrafricaine », Ministry of Social Affairs and National Reconciliation, Bangui, June 2016.

³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, international NGOs, religious leaders, members of peace committees, Bangui, Bangassou, Obo, Zémio, Bouar and Rafai, 2017-2018; local administrator, Bangui, March 2019. For general background, see Thierry Vircoulon, « A la recherche de la paix en Centrafrique : médiations communautaires, religieuses et politiques », IFRI, June 2017.

³⁷ « L'ONU exhorte les parties à appliquer 'sans retard' l'accord de paix », VOA Afrique, 13 February 2019; « RCA l'Union européenne prêt à soutenir financièrement l'accord de paix », RFI Afrique, 15 March 2019.

³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Bangui, March 2019, Brussels, April 2019. See also « Centrafrique : gouvernement et rebelles signent un accord de paix », *Le Monde*, 9 February 2019.

³⁹ The six offered positions were the RJ, MPC, FPRC, UPC, all four ex-Seleka groups and the two Anti-Balaka factions Mokom and Ngaïssona. For full names of armed groups, see Appendix D.

⁴⁰ « Accord de Paix en Centrafrique : 5 des 14 groupes armes signataires désavouent le gouvernement », *Jeune Afrique*, 4 March 2019.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interviews, civil society activists and opposition politicians, Bangui, March 2019.

Faced with the Agreement's potential collapse, Chergui summoned the parties to the AU's headquarters in Addis Ababa from 18 to 20 March. The result, unveiled through a series of presidential decrees on 22-24 March, was a complete turnaround. Armed groups gained twelve ministerial positions in a new cabinet of 39 ministers, twelve further ministerial-level or other senior posts in the president's and the prime minister's offices, including one charged with overseeing the mixed security units, as well as two prefect and five sub-prefect posts, all going to armed groups active in the areas concerned. AU officials present the compromise as a reflection of the balance of forces on the ground and a necessity for keeping armed group leaders on board in the hope of eventually reducing levels of violence, while the AU Peace and Security Council underlined that results of the Addis negotiations were in line with the agreement's provisions for dispute resolution.⁴² CAR's international partners greeted these new arrangements as a "reinforcement of the inclusive government".⁴³

In contrast, many in Bangui were stunned. Central Africans and foreign officials in the country recognise the need for concessions, but most saw the new arrangement as a step too far. Central Africans argued that some of the armed group leaders who were offered posts are not of Central African origin or nationality and lament the lack of transparency and communication, the apparent absence of any concrete concessions from the armed groups and the local legitimacy granted them through prefectural positions. Social protest movements criticised the government for conceding too much, and anti-government tracts even circulated within the armed forces.⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews revealed an unprecedented degree of anger at Touadéra's government, at least in the capital. Meanwhile, several armed groups declared that their new positions meant that the government should not deploy officials in areas under their control, in some cases even claiming that the army's deployment would violate the February agreement.⁴⁵

Whether the Agreement has reduced violence is unclear. AU officials, using UN data, argue that levels are down since February and major towns have suffered no attacks like those on Batangafo and Alindao in late 2018.⁴⁶ But some UN and humanitarian officials say that the grind of violence across the country continues and that the absence of larger-scale clashes, at least until May, was likely due mostly to the rainy season, which traditionally sees a downtick in such incidents. They point to

⁴² Crisis Group interviews, AU officials, April and May 2019. See also "Press Statement: African Union Peace and Security Council 834th Meeting", Addis Ababa, 21 March 2019.

⁴³ See « Communiqué conjoint à l'occasion de la réunion de consultation des parties prenantes de l'accord politique pour la paix et la réconciliation en république centrafricaine », MINUSCA, 20 March 2019.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews, politicians, administrators, civil society actors, international officials, Bangui, March 2019. « Centrafrique : le nouveau gouvernement déjà contesté », RFI Afrique, 24 March 2019.

⁴⁵ See « Centrafrique : déploiement des forces régulières dans une ville dominée par les rebelles », Centrafrique Presse, 20 May 2019.

⁴⁶ See statement of Smail Chergui in « Verbatim : 2e réunion du Groupe international de soutien à la République centrafricaine », MINUSCA, 15 April 2019. Crisis Group interviews, African diplomats and AU officials, March-May 2019.

continued predation by armed groups who signed the agreement.⁴⁷ Moreover, on 21 May, an outbreak of violence, mostly against civilians, around Paoua town in the north west reportedly left 34 dead. The government blamed the 3R, an Agreement signatory.⁴⁸ Under government and UN pressure, the group handed over to local authorities three members who it claims were responsible but its leaders have not yet been held to account for what was likely a planned assault.⁴⁹ Overall, it is too early to draw firm conclusions as to whether violence has decreased by more than a seasonal norm and, if so, whether this is due to the Agreement.

Beyond the power-sharing arrangements, the government has made progress on some of the agreement's provisions but not others. Preparations are reportedly under way to set up the prefectural committees and the technical monitoring committee. The bilateral commission between CAR and Cameroon met in Bangui 6-8 May to discuss cross border cooperation; a CAR-Chad commission meeting was reportedly planned for the end of the month but has since been delayed.⁵⁰ The government has finalised its communication strategy and is broadcasting information about the agreement over national and local radio.⁵¹ Forming the mixed security units has been harder, however; as described, some armed groups have yet to provide their full lists of names and some in Bangui remain sceptical that DDR will advance in the near future.⁵²

For now, therefore, the Agreement's most dramatic outcome has been the armed groups' inclusion at several levels of government. One example is particularly striking. In mid-April, Ali Darassa, leader of the UPC, was invited to Bambari and, in what appears to have been a premature attempt to launch the region's mixed security units, was appointed as head of those units in the presence of AU commissioner Chergui and UN peacekeeping head Lacroix. This happened despite previous clashes in the same town between UPC and UN forces trying to implement the UN's "towns without arms" policy.⁵³ It is unclear whether Darassa himself or the UPC made concessions related to the group's demobilisation, its activities in areas under its control or the return of state authority to those areas in exchange for the influential post. His

⁴⁷ According to one senior UN security official interviewed in May, the main patterns of predation and violence by armed groups, including roadblocks and control of mineral sites, remain largely unchanged. Crisis Group interviews, senior UN and humanitarian officials, Bangui and by telephone, March-May 2019. « Des violences se poursuivent dans certaines régions malgré l'accord de paix », VOA Afrique, 26 April 2019.

⁴⁸ Press release, Communications Ministry, Bangui, 22 May 2019; "Armed group kills more than 30 in Central African Republic: UN", AFP, 22 May 2019.

⁴⁹ « Des présumés auteurs du massacre de civils remis à la justice centrafricaine », Centrafrique Presse, 25 May 2019; « RCA : les 3R disent avoir livré les coupables du massacre de la région de Paoua », RFI, 25 May 2019.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, African diplomat, Bangui, May 2019.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, senior Communications Ministry official, Bangui, May 2019.

⁵² Crisis Group interviews, civil society actors, politicians, Bangui, March and May 2019. See « DDR en RCA : la majorité des groupes armés déposent leur liste de combattants », RFI, 18 May 2019.

⁵³ For example, the UPC fought the national army and the UN in Bambari in June 2018, killing a Burundian peacekeeper. See « Une unité des Forces armées centrafricaines attaquée à Bambari », RFI, 12 June 2018. On background to the "towns without arms" initiative, see « Centrafrique : situation sécuritaire dans la ville de Bambari, quatre ans après les violences », Africa News, 17 March 2017 and the UN video « Bambari, une ville sans armes et sans groupes armés », MINUSCA, 27 February 2017.

appointment triggered reports in both the international and Central African press that the UN and government had handed the city over to the UPC.⁵⁴ Darassa himself has reportedly told locals that the Agreement's terms and his late March appointment make him the legitimate state authority in the area.⁵⁵

C. *Challenges Ahead*

The 6 February agreement, and the lead-up to it, have brought dividends. First, Chergui's ability to bring the Russian-Sudanese initiative under the AU-led mediation's umbrella was important, averting confusion, forum shopping and the peace process's further fracturing. Secondly, including Sudan and Chad in the Khartoum talks and making the latter guarantor and facilitator of the Agreement could, if backed by diplomatic pressure, induce both to play more positive roles; according to Western and African diplomats in Bangui, Chad already is under pressure from their governments to persuade some armed groups to rein in abuses.⁵⁶ Thirdly, the Agreement restates the government's and armed groups' commitments to address the issues of state weakness and underdevelopment that underpin CAR's instability. Lastly, it reiterates the parties' and international partners' assurances on vital issues such as armed groups' demobilisation and transformation into political parties, public-sector recruitment aimed at fairly representing different communities as well as cross-border cooperation on pastoralism.⁵⁷

Considerable challenges remain, however. Notwithstanding gains made since late 2018 in pushing armed group out of towns in the centre and west of the country, the absence of significant pressure on them in most areas and the balance of power on the ground militate against the deal's implementation. Overall, the Khartoum talks added to the perception widespread in CAR that negotiators have been overly optimistic about the armed groups' willingness to demobilise. Many in Bangui question whether the armed groups signed the Agreement in good faith, with their scepticism reinforced by unverified reports that some received large sums of money to participate in the talks.⁵⁸

Some opposition and civil society figures in Bangui argue that any further negotiations should occur in-country, to better force each armed group to reveal its own position, as was the case in the Bangui forum of 2015, and avoid the creation of artificial negotiating alliances between armed groups who mainly fight each other on the ground.⁵⁹ Officials from the UN mission, which paid for armed group leaders' transportation to the Khartoum talks and would be responsible for securing Bangui

⁵⁴ These reports led to a small communications battle as the UN tried to counter them. See « Au nom de la paix, un chef de guerre a la tête de Bambari », VOA Afrique, 18 April 2019 and « Communiqué de presse conjoint gouvernement centrafricain – MINUSCA », 19 April 2019.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interview, UN security official, Bangui, May 2019.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Bangui, May 2019.

⁵⁷ Reviving regional cooperation on pastoralism has been explored in several previous Crisis Group reports.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, African diplomat, Bangui, March 2019; international security expert working on CAR, May 2019.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interviews, civil society actors and opposition politicians, Bangui, March 2019.

against possible disruption caused by armed groups leaders' presence, state that the March talks could have taken place in the CAR capital.⁶⁰

The apparent motives of the most powerful armed groups' leaders also raise doubts about the deal's chances of success. They almost certainly entered negotiations seeking international legitimacy, protection of their lucrative control of territory and resources, and relief from UN peacekeepers' pressure. Despite failing to achieve assurances of amnesty in Khartoum, they still hope that signing the Agreement will diminish prospects that they will face national or international justice.⁶¹ True, belligerents in many wars enter negotiations for similar reasons. But the most powerful of CAR's armed groups also can draw the conclusion from past experience that they can achieve these objectives without either demobilising their fighters or even meaningfully reducing violence. Awarding them significant government posts, as was done in March, in return for commitments that are either unrealistic (stopping all violence) or about which the parties hold different views (entering the mixed units), seems unlikely to persuade them otherwise.

During and after negotiations, the government's approach has appeared inconsistent and poorly communicated to the public. Emboldened by its alliance with Moscow, the government barely met members of the AU panel, and therefore played a minor role in the run-up to Khartoum. Through February and March, it flipped from resisting armed groups' demands for top government posts to throwing wide open the state administration's doors. The president's and his top officials' early failure to engage the public, through communication or travel in-country, set against their frequent travel abroad, has reinforced the view that they see external actors as their main constituency.⁶² It has also meant that government negotiators could not leverage public revulsion at the armed groups' abuses during talks, particularly to counter AU pressure to award those groups more government slots during the March Addis meeting.⁶³

The parties appear to have emerged from talks in Khartoum with different understanding of some of the deal's critical points.⁶⁴ One early manifestation was the

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interviews, UN officials, March and May 2019.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interviews, civil society expert involved in mediation with armed groups, international security reform expert, Bangui, March 2019. The former pointed to the disconnect between those demands and what the armed groups actually want. He mentioned as an example the armed groups' request that the government build schools. When the government subsequently seeks to build up its administrative presence, however, the armed groups impede the work of, or even threaten to kill, these government officials unless they leave areas they control. For background on the armed groups' motivations, see Chauvin, « La guerre en Centrafrique, à l'ombre du Tchad : Une escalade conflictuelle régionale? », op. cit.; and Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°105, *The Central African Republic's Hidden Conflict*, 12 December 2014.

⁶² Crisis Group interviews, government and opposition politicians, Bangui, March 2019. See also Vircoulon, « Centrafrique : quand l'objectif est la négociation et non la paix », *La Conversation*, March 2019.

⁶³ On the fact that the government was under pressure in Addis: Crisis Group interview, international official close to the negotiations, Bangui, May 2019.

⁶⁴ While most negotiations start from largely opposing views, some have argued to Crisis Group and even one member of the AU panel has admitted that a combination of preparation which saw no give-and-take and a short round of talks in Khartoum meant that much of the detailed negotiation was left until after the agreement was signed. Most if not all of the over one hundred armed

armed groups' rejection of President Touadéra's 3 March cabinet, illustrating divergent understandings of Bangui's commitment to inclusion. Similar misunderstanding extended to the mixed security units. Neither the parties nor the UN discussed their set-up in detail and thus left Khartoum with different perceptions of how they would work. The AU, UN and government assumed that the UN would vet individual armed group members and integrate them into joint units under army commanders who themselves had received UN or EU training.⁶⁵ The larger armed groups, however, appear to envisage their forces entering special units with command structures intact, thus allowing them to police – and continue to extort – cattle herding corridors and mining areas, only now with the state's implicit blessing.⁶⁶

Overall, while the Agreement may usefully serve to mobilise government action and international support, its political foundations are weak. Understandably, mediators and international actors supporting the talks were relieved that armed groups that, a few years ago, were demanding amnesties and threatening to march on Bangui turned up in Khartoum. But in reality, the parties gave little substantial ground beyond vague commitments to end violence, their perceptions of the agreement diverge and continued violence since suggests that the armed groups did not sign in good faith. Perhaps most importantly, the talks saw the AU mediate between the government and fourteen groups with often divergent interests. Indeed, at least two anti-balaka groups are so close to government officials that negotiations between them and Bangui are largely meaningless.⁶⁷ Most fighting on the ground now occurs among armed groups – not between them and national security forces. Such violence can only be addressed through local peacebuilding and progress on disarmament, two key aspects of the Agreement that need further work.

group "demands" compiled by the panel in 2017 and 2018 were already well known. Equally, informed observers and officials in Bangui and Addis claim that lines of communication between the AU panel and headquarters in Addis were weak throughout 2018, leaving the panel with little political support. Crisis Group interviews, Western and African diplomats, civil society member involved in mediation, Bangui, Addis Ababa, March and May 2019.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interviews, UN and African officials, Bangui, March 2019; EU officials, Brussels, April 2019.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interviews, civil society members and politicians, Bangui, March 2019.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, senior diplomat, Bangui, January 2019.

IV. Furthering the Peace Agenda

If chronic state weakness underpins CAR's instability, the principal driver of violence in the country today lies with armed groups that resist the presence of the state, which they see as a threat to their interests in mining and herding, and that compete with each other for territory and opportunities for profit. So long as the largest of these groups remain potent forces, can outgun the CAR army and UN peacekeepers, enjoy support in neighbouring countries and control vast tracts of the country largely unchallenged, they likely will have little incentive to meaningfully compromise.

While six years of negotiations between the CAR government and armed groups have helped extract basic commitments from the parties and galvanised support from international partners, they suffer from some weaknesses. First, in CAR nearly all fighting is among armed groups, not between them and the government, indicating that the armed groups are not motivated by their stated grievances as discussed in talks, but by controlling territory on the ground. Secondly, while armed groups have some support when they claim to defend communities from attack by other groups, especially in the absence of state authorities, little evidence suggests they are the legitimate representatives of local populations. Thirdly, talks have been held around six times since the crisis started, and the Khartoum negotiations and recent Agreement mainly served to repeat commitments made before. Finally, armed groups face insufficient pressure to implement their side of repeated deals, and the failure to make those agreements stick damages public support for the peace process.

The government and its international partners should continue to build on the basic principles of the February Agreement, in particular by extracting reciprocal concessions from armed groups where possible. But they need to complement any further national-level talks with armed groups with local peace initiatives and, in the governments' case, better engage the population as a whole, including those living under the sway of armed groups. Such an approach will in any case be necessary as state officials deploy to provincial capitals where armed groups have mainly local agendas.

International stakeholders should also seek to increase pressure on the armed groups: the AU and UN by encouraging CAR's neighbours, especially Chad, to help use their influence to persuade those groups to meet their commitments in the Agreement; Russia by doing the same; and all international actors by isolating leaders who reject compromise. The overarching goal should remain the armed groups' demobilisation, but given their strong presence on the ground, it cannot happen throughout all CAR overnight. In the interim, however, the government and its partners still could aim to reduce violence, improve access and protection for humanitarian groups and state officials, and thus at least ameliorate civilians' plight in areas that armed groups control or contest.

A. *Reciprocal Steps from Armed Groups*

While bringing into government some powerful armed group leaders is likely necessary given the current balance of forces and to fulfil Bangui's side of the February deal, the government should do so in a manner that encourages better behaviour. So far, that does not appear to have been the case. First, some of the late March appointments appeared to do the opposite, rewarding the worst abusers. Moreover,

merely awarding government posts is unlikely to have a positive effect insofar as armed group leaders have held such posts periodically for years – and Seleka even ran the country in 2013 – with little impact on their predatory conduct. Nor is it likely that empowering large groups will help bring stability – on the theory that it can produce a form of “rogue’s peace”, the logic apparently underpinning some of the late March appointments – given the propensity of those groups to fracture and others to emerge.

Instead, the government should announce, in conjunction with the AU and the UN, that the posts offered to armed groups’ leaders in late March are conditional on those groups fulfilling their side of the bargain in the February Agreement. With the March appointments, the government has met – indeed, in the eyes of many in Bangui, exceeded – one of its key pledges. In turn, the armed groups should take steps to reduce violence. The government could impose a deadline, after which armed group leaders would lose their posts unless there are signs of progress. Some AU and UN officials in Addis Ababa and Bangui express support for such an idea.⁶⁸ Indeed, the Agreement provides for sanctions against those who do not adhere to its terms, including violence reduction. Withdrawing government posts would seem to be a reasonable sanction in this case.⁶⁹

The commissions established by the Agreement could flesh out benchmarks along these lines. The Executive Committee, chaired by the government and AU, is mandated to evaluate each party’s adherence to the deal. Its remit could be clarified to include establishing benchmarks on armed groups’ compliance.⁷⁰ At a minimum, these would involve steps to diminish civilian suffering by reducing violence and allowing humanitarian and state officials to work unimpeded; it could also include armed group members being vetted by the UN and participating in mixed security units under the army’s command as a first step toward their demobilisation. The Executive Committee could consult with the National Implementation Committee, on which the armed groups are represented, to seek consensus on such benchmarks. Should that prove impossible, they could be imposed unilaterally.

The concerns some mediators raise regarding such an approach are valid but appear overblown. Some AU officials argue that it could prompt further violence as it could lead the armed groups to walk away from the agreement.⁷¹ Yet the government and AU could mitigate such concerns with an approach tailored to different parts of the country, based on each group’s behaviour, and by setting realistic benchmarks. In any case, the larger groups are primarily motivated by the desire to protect their territory. The levels of violence they perpetrate hinge more on whether those territories come under threat than on whether they retain government posts. Expelling their

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interviews, AU officials, Addis Ababa, May 2019; telephone interviews, UN officials, May 2019.

⁶⁹ In Articles 34 and 35 of the Agreement, the parties agree to settle differences through mediation and that violating the agreement will expose them to “repressive measures”, to be taken by the agreement’s guarantors, and to sanctions. A senior AU official agreed that withdrawal of posts in the inclusive government could be seen as such a sanction. Crisis Group interview, April 2019.

⁷⁰ There are indications that the government is considering something close to such benchmarks in its negotiations with the 3R group following the May violence near Paoua. See « Centrafrique : accusé de massacres, le groupe 3R accepte de démanteler ses bases », *Jeune Afrique*, 31 May 2019.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interviews, AU officials and African diplomat, Bangui and Addis Ababa, May 2019.

representatives from government is thus unlikely to meaningfully affect the scope of violence, but would at least send a positive signal to smaller groups, some of whom are reportedly more seriously considering starting disarmament.⁷² It would also embed the notion of reciprocity in the negotiating process – a principle that will be all the more important if and when establishment of a new balance of forces makes genuine give-and-take more likely.

B. *Supporting Local Peace Committees*

The government ought to complement those efforts with greater support to local peace committees. It should work with the UN to build on those committees' successes in resolving disputes and negotiating local truces between armed groups.⁷³ In some places, it might make sense for a local peace committee to merge with the prefecture committee envisaged in the February Agreement and thus enjoy better funding and support. In others, establishing separate prefecture committees but ensuring that their work supports that of the existing peace committees might be more effective. Either way, the CAR authorities should allow flexibility based on local conditions while avoiding co-opting existing initiatives.⁷⁴

Working with the local committees could bring other benefits. It could help officials develop a more nuanced understanding of armed groups' motives than is possible in negotiations between government and all armed groups together, while also taking greater account of civil society and opposition concerns. By supporting the committees at a local level, the government will likely have greater impact on populations affected by violence than if it were to focus solely on national-level ones.

C. *Improving Public Communication*

Though part of the problem in implementing the Agreement lies with the substance of the government's approach (notably its stark reversal in March in awarding armed groups government posts while apparently receiving little in return), communication also has been lacking. Thus far, it has tended to justify including armed group leaders in government on the basis that it had no choice.⁷⁵ The government's strategy is constrained by circumstance: given the balance of power on the ground, the government cannot claim that including armed groups in government, or conversely threatening to expel them, will reduce violence in the short term. Nevertheless, it needs to explain how making strategic concessions to some groups, conditional on progress with disarmament, if combined with other measures described in this report, could start to make a difference.

The government's EU-backed efforts to "popularise" the Agreement, which include its translation into the national language Sango, may help bring on board portions of a sceptical public. But insofar as their scepticism is focused more on the end of March appointments than on the terms of the Agreement per se, officials will have to explain

⁷² Crisis Group interviews, UN officials, Bangui, January and May 2019.

⁷³ Crisis Group interviews, member of local peace committee, local administrator, Bangui, January 2019.

⁷⁴ A local peace committee member highlighted this risk. Crisis Group interview, Bangui, January 2019.

⁷⁵ Video of the joint government and UN press conference is available.

the government's broader approach to negotiations with armed groups, including their inclusion in government. The government's recently finalised communication strategy at least shows that it recognises the challenge.⁷⁶ But unless it more clearly articulates its policies, it will struggle to win popular support for the process, especially given that this agreement is at least the sixth of its kind that the armed groups have signed since 2013. Gaining such support also requires deeper engagement with the provinces, with ministers spending more time hearing people's concerns there and less travelling abroad.

D. *Greater International Pressure*

The Agreement enjoys broad international buy-in and has averted the previous fragmentation of mediation efforts, but this must now be translated into progress on the ground. International actors should back the government's continued local engagement with armed groups, its support for peace committees and efforts to deploy state agents and security forces throughout the country. The AU, UN, EU and ideally Russia, together with their respective implementing partners, will need to agree on an effective division of labour as they plan to increase support for elements of the Agreement.⁷⁷ A joint EU-AU technical level visit to Bangui on 10-13 April to assess how to create the mixed security units and continued attention from the AU Peace and Security Commission are welcome signs.⁷⁸ But international actors also will need to revive regional diplomacy to bring along Chad and, when the situation stabilises in Khartoum, Sudan.

The AU Commission, as the deal's architect and member of the National Executive Monitoring Committee, could play an important role. Thus far, it is bolstering its presence in Bangui to support the deal's implementation. But the view of CAR's government and of many in Bangui that the AU has been overly indulgent toward the armed groups – particularly when it came to the late March negotiations in Addis Ababa – could hamper its future involvement. By working with the government to define and set benchmarks for adherence to the agreement and discussing those with the armed groups, the AU could both improve relations with Bangui and use its contacts with armed groups to clearly signal the need for progress. The AU also ought to improve communication between its Bangui office and Addis to bolster coordination and so that officials in the latter are better informed about what is happening in the country, and those on the ground receive full support.

Progress also depends on Chad and Sudan using their influence over some armed groups to help persuade them to reduce violence, permit the state's return to areas they control and eventually demobilise. These states should also declare their readiness to take back their nationals who are fighting with armed groups in CAR, if

⁷⁶ The communications strategy, which is separate from its efforts to "popularise" the agreement, has just recently been finalised. Crisis Group obtained a draft copy. The government spokesperson addressed the challenges of popularising the agreement in a 25 April 2019 press conference. UN officials have also explained the importance of the Agreement to Central Africans living in the provinces.

⁷⁷ The EU worked through various implementing partners, including the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue and the Community of St Egidio, to engage with armed groups and the government in preparation for talks.

⁷⁸ Press release, AU Peace and Security Commission, 9 May 2019.

disarmament proceeds. To date, poor relations between Bangui, on one hand, and its two neighbours, on the other, have stood in the way. Armed groups' leaders acquire weapons in both Chad and Sudan, often enjoy support from within their security apparatuses and in some cases have homes and spend considerable time in their capitals. Both countries have significant interests in cross-border pastoralism: herders from both take cattle to CAR for seasonal grazing, a migratory pattern that has become ever more militarised. Chad is one of the Agreement's guarantors, but contacts between Bangui and Ndjamen – and also between Bangui and Khartoum – have been hindered by popular resentment against these two countries' perceived role in CAR's civil wars and coups since the early 2000s.

The AU and the UN should rapidly agree on ways to kick-start regional diplomacy and facilitate meetings between these countries at the leadership and working levels. Chad reportedly sees its contacts with armed groups as a necessity given the absence of state administration in northern CAR and the risks posed by instability at the border areas.⁷⁹ But Ndjamen also needs to engage with the government in Bangui and find common ground concerning stability in border regions. The AU and the UN, along with the ECCAS, are best placed to lead such efforts. The commitment by ECCAS secretary general Ahmad Allam-Mi and UN Regional Office to Central Africa head Louceny Fall, taken during their 2-5 April visit to Bangui, to seek to revive such diplomacy, is a good start.⁸⁰ If the meeting of the bilateral commission on pastoralism between CAR and Chad, reportedly scheduled for late May but which has been delayed, takes place, it would also be a positive sign.

Russia, too, could lend its support. The creation of a Russian-language radio station in Bangui in November 2018 and Moscow's late April decision to deploy officers as part of MINUSCA point to its desire to continue its involvement in CAR. Russian officials seemingly have ties to both the government and armed groups, though whether they will be able to maintain this balancing act is unclear; already, as noted, Moscow's closer relationship with Bangui appears to have cost it some influence with the armed groups. Moscow, which has expressed support for the deal, would ideally use its influence in coordination with the government and AU to nudge the armed groups toward meeting their side of it.⁸¹ At the very least, it should avoid creating diplomatic tracks that work at cross-purposes.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interviews, international official, April 2019; African diplomat, Bangui, May 2019.

⁸⁰ « Communiqué conjoint de la CEEAC et l'ONU soulignent le rôle clé de la sous-régional pour une paix et stabilité durables en RCA Bangui », 5 April 2019.

⁸¹ See citation of Russian Federation Representative in "Central African Republic Still Needs Robust International Support amid Precarious Humanitarian Situation, Special representative Tells Security Council", UN Security Council, Meetings Coverage, 21 February, 2019.

V. Conclusion

Six years after the Seleka took over Bangui, which sparked the worst bloodletting the country has ever seen, much of the Central African Republic continues to suffer from violence perpetrated by armed groups. To date, neither the national armed forces nor the UN peacekeeping mission has been able to contain it. The 6 February Agreement has had the merit of focusing attention on the crisis and ensuring that international actors are on the same page. But implementation will require sustained commitment from the government and its international partners.

Nairobi/Brussels, 18 June 2019

Appendix A: Map of Central African Republic



Appendix B: Reaching a Deal: A Timeline

January 2013

A coup plunges the Central African Republic (CAR) into turmoil. Armed groups begin to proliferate.

2013-2017

After a lull in fighting, armed groups assert control over swathes of the country.

August 2018

Fourteen armed groups submit a list of demands to the government, including development in areas under their control and their inclusion in state structures.

August 2018

After significantly increasing its involvement in CAR, Moscow signs a military cooperation agreement with Bangui.

October 2018

Two ex-Seleka groups stage a six-day attack on the city of Batangafo, destroying IDP camps.

November 2018

Another ex-Seleka group attacks Alindao town, destroying IDP camps, burning a church with people inside and killing herders.

January 2019

President Faustin-Archange Touadéra announces that his government will participate in AU-led talks with armed groups in Khartoum.

6 February 2019

The government and fourteen armed groups sign a peace deal aimed at bringing an end to six years of bloodshed.

March 2019

Armed groups reject a proposed new government. The AU convenes more talks in Addis Ababa, leading to a new government with additional slots for armed group leaders.

May 2019

A major outbreak of violence near Paoua town, triggered by one of the groups that signed the deal, kills 54 people.

Appendix C: Acronyms

DDRR	Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration and Repatriation
ECCAS	Economic Community of Central African States
MINUSCA	Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Central African Republic
PK5	Muslim neighbourhood in Bangui's 3rd district

Appendix D: The Fourteen Armed Groups Signatory to the Peace Agreement

Armed Group	Leader
Anti-Balaka/Mokom	Maxime Mokom
Anti-Balaka/Ngaïssona	Patrice-Edouard Ngaïssona
Front Démocratique du Peuple Centrafricain	Martin Koumtamadji (aka Abdoulaye Miskine)
Front Populaire pour la Renaissance de la Centrafrique	Nourredine Adam
Mouvement des Libérateurs Centrafricains pour la Justice (MLCJ)	Toumou Deya Gilbert
Mouvement Patriotique pour la Centrafrique	Alkhatim Ahamat Mahamat
Rassemblement Patriotique pour le Renouveau de la Centrafrique	Herbert Gontran Djono-Ahaba
Retour, Réclamation et Réhabilitation (3R)	Sidiki Abass Soulimane
Révolution et Justice/Belanga	Bertrand Belanga
Révolution et Justice/Sayo	Armel Ningatoloum Sayo
Séléka/Rénové	Mohamed Moussa Dhaffne
Union des Forces Républicaines	Philippe Wagramale
Union des Forces Républicaines Fondamentales	Dieu Benit Christian Gbeya-Kikobet
Union pour la Paix en Centrafrique	Ali Darassa Mahamat

Appendix E: Key Passages in the Political Agreement

In the order they appear above.

Article 4 Government commitments on Truth, Justice, Reparation and Reconciliation commission:

To accelerate the process to establish the Commission on Truth, Justice, Reparation and Reconciliation through the timely launch of national consultations and the adoption of a law on that Commission.

On civil war:

We, the Government of the Central African Republic on the one part, and armed groups on the other part, hereinafter referred to as “the Parties”

Recognizing that this latest crisis has inflicted untold suffering, caused the deaths of many, resulted in thousands of internally displaced persons and refugees, with humanitarian consequences and disastrous economic losses, eroded the social fabric, encouraged separatism, profoundly destabilized the Central African Republic and threatened subregional cohesion and stability

On political manipulation of ethnicity and religion:

[...]

Fully aware that the political manipulation of ethnic and religious identities poses serious threats to social cohesion and national unity, and that the current status quo is unsustainable and threatens the very existence of the Central African Republic, which has been damaged to its core

On social marginalisation of women, youth, underrepresented minorities:

[...]

Recognizing that the majority of the population of the Central African Republic is made up of children and women who have been deeply affected by the armed conflict, and that the full protection of their rights and the cessation of abuses and hostilities are objectives common to all Parties; and, convinced of the fundamental role of women of the Central African Republic in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in building sustainable peace, and emphasizing their important contribution to the efforts to find a definitive solution to end the crisis in the Central African Republic

[...]

Convinced of the urgent need to promote inclusiveness in public policies and national programmes in order to prevent and combat marginalization and work toward building a more just society as the foundation of the new social contract of the Central African Republic

Article 19 on rejection of using armed violence for political ends:

The Parties agree to abstain from any attempt to access or retain power by force, in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Constitution of the Central African Republic and the Constitutive Act of the African Union

Article 5 (d) Armed group commitments on disbanding:

By mutual agreement of the Parties and the partners, to proceed with the complete dissolution of armed groups throughout the country and, in this context, to continue to exercise full control over their respective forces and commit to ensuring their immediate respect for the security arrangements provided for in this Agreement. In this respect, any person or armed unit that violates those security arrangements shall be punished in accordance with the laws and regulations in force

Article 5 (h) Armed group commitments on disbanding and forming political parties:

To put an immediate end to all forms of recruitment into armed groups, including the recruitment of children and foreigners; to make any claim through peaceful means, including, where appropriate, through the establishment of political organizations

Annex 2 of the Accord on Government commitment (decentralization law):

Policy Commitment n°3, actors: Government, African Union, National Assembly:

Efforts leading to the adoption of the act on decentralization:

This act is an asset for the implementation of regional development actions. It will also help to establish the first concrete actions for correcting disparities

Annex 2 of the Accord on Government commitment (former presidents' special status):

Policy Commitment n°5, actors: Government, National Assembly, Partners:

Working group:

- To review the Political Parties Act; and
- On the status of former Heads of State.

[...]

In addition, the construction of a democratic system based on the alternation of power calls for former Heads of State to be offered a decent life in society. It is also an opportunity to undertake work that can help to strengthen democratic culture.

Article 21 on inclusive government:

The President of the Republic, the Head of State, commits to establishing an inclusive Government immediately after the signing of this Agreement.

Article 16 arrangements on mixed special units:

The Parties undertake, upon signature of the present Agreement, to establish joint security units for an initial transition period of twenty-four (24) months. The joint security units shall be under the supervision of the Chief of Staff of the defense forces and may seek the technical support of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA). The joint security units shall include members of the national security and defense forces and

their majority shall comprise members of armed groups who have fully adhered to the principles of this Agreement and completed an appropriate training regime lasting two (2) months.

Articles 4 (h) and 5 (g) on DDRR:

Art. 4 (h) Government commitments on DDRR: To facilitate the management and participation of the armed groups within all structures in charge of the disarmament, demobilization, reintegration and repatriation process, including the Strategic Committee and the Advisory and Monitoring Committee for National Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration and Repatriation/Security Sector Reform/National Reconciliation throughout the entire period of implementation of the National Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration and Repatriation Programme.

Art. 5 (g) Armed groups commitments on DDRR: To participate fully in the disarmament, demobilization, reintegration and repatriation process and engage in good faith in the programme to reintegrate members of armed groups into the uniformed services or income-generating activities; to submit the lists of members of armed groups eligible for the National Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration and Repatriation Programme within 60 days of signature of this Agreement; and to start the demobilization and disarmament operations within the time frame determined by the Programme.

Articles 30, 31 and Annex 1 on the creation of national-level committees:

Art. 30: [The Parties agree] To establish an Executive Monitoring Committee, co-chaired by the Government and the African Union, and comprising the Parties to this Agreement, the Guarantors, the Facilitators and major stake-holders of the Central African Republic.

[...]

Art. 31: A National Implementation Committee, comprising various ministerial departments (interministerial), various institutions of the Republic (inter-agency) and armed groups shall meet, as needed, under the chairmanship of the person appointed for that purpose by the President of the Republic.

[...]

Annex 1 paragraph 6: The Technical Security Committee shall oversee the implementation of temporary security arrangements. It shall operate under the authority of the Government and include a representative of the Armed Forces of the Central African Republic, a representative of the internal security forces and at least one representative of every signatory armed group with an active military presence in the prefecture. It may, upon its request, receive technical support from MINUSCA.

Article 32 on the creation of prefectural-level committees:

Prefectural Implementation Committees shall be established at the prefecture level and shall have the composition, powers and procedures set out in Annex 1.

Articles 14 on pastoralism:

The Parties agree to establish a system of effective and equitable management of seasonal pastoral migration in order to make it a secure and peaceful activity, essential to the harmonious economic development of herders and farmers, based on a guiding national framework and local frameworks which shall be developed in consultation with the affected communities.

Appendix F: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

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Matthew Devlin	Christopher Louney	Bobbi Thomason
Victoria Ergolavou	Matthew Magenheim	AJ Twombly
Noa Gafni	Madison Malloch-Brown	Dillon Twombly
Christina Bache	Megan McGill	Annie Verderosa
Lynda Hammes	Hamesh Mehta	Zachary Watling
Jason Hesse	Tara Opalinski	Grant Webster
Dalí ten Hove	Perfecto Sanchez	

SENIOR ADVISERS

Former Board Members who maintain an association with Crisis Group, and whose advice and support are called on (to the extent consistent with any other office they may be holding at the time).

Martti Ahtisaari Chairman Emeritus	Christoph Bertram Lakhdar Brahimi	Aleksander Kwasniewski Ricardo Lagos
George Mitchell Chairman Emeritus	Kim Campbell Jorge Castañeda	Joanne Leedom-Ackerman Todung Mulya Lubis
Gareth Evans President Emeritus	Joaquim Alberto Chissano Victor Chu	Graça Machel Jessica T. Mathews
Kenneth Adelman Adnan Abu-Odeh	Mong Joon Chung Sheila Coronel	Miklós Németh Christine Ockrent
HRH Prince Turki al-Faisal	Pat Cox Gianfranco Dell'Alba	Timothy Ong Roza Otunbayeva
Celso Amorim Óscar Arias	Jacques Delors Alain Destexhe	Olara Otunnu Lord (Christopher) Patten
Richard Armitage Diego Arria	Mou-Shih Ding Uffe Ellemann-Jensen	Surin Pitsuwan Fidel V. Ramos
Zainab Bangura Nahum Barnea	Stanley Fischer Carla Hills	Olympia Snowe Javier Solana
Kim Beazley Shlomo Ben-Ami	Swanee Hunt Wolfgang Ischinger	