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## **Media 'wrong' to ignore Christians' plight in Central African Republic**

### **Detailed report claims Christians are targeted, Muslims 'left alone'**

World Watch Monitor (03.01.2014) - The vulnerability of Christians in the Central African Republic (CAR) is being overlooked, even as international media wrongly focus on the 'interfaith' element of the conflict, says Open Doors International.

The charity facilitated a key meeting in Oct. 2013 of all major Christian leaders, who then appealed for international intervention. Now in its detailed report, [Vulnerability Assessment of Christians in the Central African Republic](http://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/research/2914097) (<http://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/research/2914097>), the charity says there is strong evidence that Christians have been specifically targeted since the March coup that brought Séléka leader Michel Djotodia to power.

Last week [Christians gathered at the capital city's airport to protest against Djotodia's rule](http://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2013/12/2906286) (<http://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2013/12/2906286>), and violence continues between rebels from the now-disbanded Séléka rebel group and self-defence militias named 'Anti-Balaka' (Anti-Machete).

The Anti-Balaka groups have been widely reported to be Christian-dominated, but [World Watch Monitor reported last week](#) that CAR's Christian leaders vehemently deny this is the case.

Children's charity [Unicef reported on Dec. 30](#) that the violence has "sunk to a vicious new low" after reported beheadings of children. Open Doors International says that both ex-Séléka rebels and the Anti-Balaka have been guilty of human rights abuses, but that it is wrong to refer to their conflict as a battle between Muslim and Christian groups.

Open Doors International quotes a statement made by a group of CAR bishops in early December, which reads: "We deplore the [reports] that are made about the Anti-Balaka [being a Christian group]. The Anti-Balaka are the expression of the part of the population fed up with the many abuses committed by Séléka rebels. However, we reiterate that all Anti-Balaka are not Christians and all Christians are not Anti-Balaka. It is the same for ex-Séléka [members] and Muslims."

However, the charity says it would be foolish to rule out Séléka's religious motives, claiming the group is 95% Muslim and that only 10% are CAR nationals. The rest, reports the charity, are jihadist militants from neighbouring Chad and Sudan.

The *Vulnerability Assessment* notes that at least 13 pastors have been killed in the conflict and many Christian churches, homes and schools burned down, while Muslims have largely been "left alone".

In a letter to the charity, Pastor P.R. Guerengbo wrote: "Both Catholic and Protestant churches, and Christians in general, are more vulnerable to the conflict. Muslims in occupied cities are better protected. Moreover, Islamic leaders are respected and honoured by Séléka, in opposition to Christian leaders." Open Doors International says

the International Crisis Group was wrong to “completely overlook” the religious dimension of the conflict in its June 2013 report.

“The [ICG] report does not establish any relation between the latent religious tensions in the country, the strong Muslim presence within Séléka’s leadership and the high number of violent incidents targeting Christians,” Open Doors International writes. “In our opinion, the International Crisis Group is wrong to equate Séléka as a mere coalition of groups dissatisfied with the regime. Indeed, there are sufficient indicators that hint at the fact that Séléka has, at least in part, an Islamist agenda.”

[World Watch Monitor reported in May](#) that the Catholic Church wrote a letter to the then-new President, Michel Djotodia, asking him to explain the existence of a letter that appears to show Djotodia’s desire to turn the Central African Republic into an Islamic republic.

In the letter, to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Djeddah (Saudi Arabia) in April 2012, a scan of which was seen by World Watch Monitor, Djotodia introduced himself as the defender of the Muslims’ cause in Chad and the Central African Republic.

He told them the two countries “have no respect for us” and asked for support from his “brothers”.

“In Central Africa, Muslims are insulted and despised every day and they are considered as foreigners... That’s why we decided in 2006 to organise ourselves, thanks to the support of some Muslim brothers from Sudan – to claim our rights,” said Djotodia, who was the leader of the Union of Democratic Forces for Unity (UFDR), a rebel group operating in Northern CAR, a year ago.

In his two-page letter, Djotodia claimed that “all Christians are liars” and revealed his project for CAR.

“If by God’s will, we reach Bangui, we will set up an Islamic regime in order to apply the sharia [law],” he wrote. “Even if we fail to drive out Bozizé, we intend to transform some parts of Central Africa, Chad and Darfur, into a new Islamic republic.”

The Catholic Church criticised Djotodia for not yet denying the authenticity of the letter or distancing himself from it.

“Would you be effectively the author of the letter sent to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation in Saudi Arabia, dated 17 April 2012?” the Catholic Church wrote. “How does one explain the fierceness of Séléka against our institutions?”

Open Doors International’s report concludes that Christians are particularly vulnerable economically, politically and in terms of personal health and security, saying: “In these areas, CAR’s Christians have been victims of targeted violence at intense degrees, while the Muslim minority of CAR has been left alone. The intentions of the Séléka rebels are not only political. From the findings presented in this report, it is clear that Séléka also has an implicit religious agenda.”

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## Catholic clerics mugged at gunpoint in Central African Republic

**Archbishop says Christians continue to pay with their lives, property and dignity**

World Watch Monitor (03.10.2013) - Two Catholic clerics in the Central African Republic were bound and robbed by armed men on Friday, Sept. 27.

Italian missionary Fr. Beniamino Gusmeroli, and Fr. Martial Mengue, a Central African deacon, were attacked by men believed to be Sudanese.

Their rooms were ransacked and valuable items stolen.

The incident took place in the mission of Our Lady of Fatima Bouar, in the northwest of the country. Gusmeroli, an Italian missionary from Valtellina, released a statement to World Watch Monitor describing their three-hour ordeal.

According to the statement, it began about 10 p.m., when a group of men in military uniforms and carrying Kalashnikov rifles forced the mission's night guard – whose hands were tied behind his back – to show them to the bedroom of Fr. Mengue, where they took everything they could: money, computers and other valuable items such as his passport.

Fr. Gusmeroli was also robbed and had his bedroom ransacked.

"I was sleeping when around 11 p.m., I heard a knock at the door. I went out and I found myself with a Kalashnikov pointed at my nose," Gusmeroli said in the statement. "I tried to keep the gunman calm, but he began to threaten me. The only French words he knows are 'l'argent' [money] and 'Je vais vous tuer' [I will kill you]. After a few kicks I was forced to sit in the chair next to the bed where they had me tied up with adhesive tape at three points: mouth, eyes and ears."

This kind of attack, targeting church clerics, is the second in recent days. CAN News reported that Fr. Aurelio Gazzera, an Italian priest who works in Bozoum, was beaten by members of Séléka, when visiting a rebel base on Sept. 16 to ask for the release of captives.

Séléka rebels took power in March, and have waged numerous acts of violence against civilians across the country, frequently though not exclusively targeting Christians and their churches, businesses and homes.

Bossangoa, 250 kilometres north of the capital Bangui, was the theatre of violent clashes between Séléka rebels and vigilante groups formed by civilians exasperated by their attacks. Officially, 100 people have been killed and more than 30,000 others have sought refuge in the diocese of the city.

In an address during mass on Sept. 29, the Archbishop of Bangui, Mgr. Dieudonne Nzapalainga, warned that interfaith confrontation would be suicidal for the country.

"This rebellion has brought doubt and mistrust in relations between Christians and Muslims. It has shaken the roots of mutual trust that characterised our life together, once harmonious and smooth," he said. "Christians have paid massively and continue to pay with their lives, property and dignity for the evils of Séléka."

Nzapalainga said many Muslims had also suffered at the hands of Séléka.

On Sept. 13, Central African Republic President Djotodia announced the dissolution of Séléka, which had brought him to power in March.

The situation in the Central African Republic was on the agenda of the UN General Assembly, attended by CAR Prime Minister Nicolas Tchangai and several members of civil society, including Rev. Nicolas Nguérékoyamé, the President of the Alliance Evangelical in Central African Republic.

In Bangui, the capital, joint patrols organised by regional troops and Central African Republic security forces have helped to bring relative security in the city, say residents contacted by World Watch Monitor.

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