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Protection of Civilians in A Protracted Intra-State Armed Conflict: A Case of The Central African Republic (CAR)

Author:

Watson Karuma Karomba
 Assistant Researcher
 IPSTC
 Nairobi, Kenya

Martin Ogaye
 Assistant Researcher
 IPSTC
 Nairobi, Kenya

Catherine Kirongothi

Dr. Michael Sitawa
 Senior Researcher
 IPSTC
 Nairobi, Kenya

Abstract

The conflict in Central Africa Republic (CAR) has affected civilians comprised of men, women, girls, and boys since 2014. The impact has led to displacement of civilians, deaths and injuries; as well as destruction of infrastructure that necessitated the United Nations (UN) through the UN Security Council Resolution 2149 (2014) to create a mandate for protection of civilians (PoC) through the UN Peacekeeping force under MINUSCA. The mandate of MINUSCA has been to protect civilians and support the transition process in CAR. The conflict is characterized by an intra-state conflict situation that erupted in 2012 and continues to disrupt a negotiated path to peace. This is caused by non-state armed groups continued hostilities as a result of grievances emanating from the government's lack of political will to honour past peace agreements. The resulting impact has been an economic meltdown, poor governance and breakdown of law and order that has led to various forms of abuses against civilian rights by all parties to the conflict. MINUSCA's attempts to stabilize the country both in 2019 and 2020 have been hampered by mistrust among these parties leading to a failed peace agreement and failed election. According to UNICEF, the resulting effects have been the displacement of over 200 000 civilians in the region in 2020 and over half a million men, women, boys and girls by 2021. Furthermore, borderlands issues impact protection of civilians given that the external dynamics revolving around CAR and her neighbours have far-reaching repercussions with the sustained PSO efforts addressing the crisis. In this regard, this paper will seek to analyse the level of

protection of civilians in CAR. In addition, the paper will assess the strategies in place to protect civilians in CAR. It will also discuss the borderlands issues threatening the conflict management measures in place in CAR. Finally, the paper will use the relative deprivation theory to explain the continued disruption of the peace processes in CAR by non-state armed groups.

Key Terms: Peacekeeping, Civilians, protection of civilians, mandate, parties to the conflict, displacement, borderlands

Introduction

United Nations (UN) Peacekeeping is an intervention within the international system through consensus from the UN member states to intervene in an armed conflict situation in order to maintain international peace as stipulated in the UN Charter. Deliberations on the need to deploy a peacekeeping mission are debated in the UN General Assembly (UNGA) and recommendations forwarded to the UN Security Council who make the decision to deploy through a mandate outlining the specific objectives of respective missions (MacQueen, 2006). The peacekeeping missions are comprised of members of the national armed forces and police of troop and police contributing countries who are members of the UN. All peacekeeping missions have the overall objective of enhancing Protection of civilians caught up in armed conflict. The objective is to ensure men, women, girls and boys are shielded from the direct effects of conduct of hostilities and all Geneva Conventions Protocols and other instruments are instilled including separating civilians from combatants in conflict situations.

There are currently about 90, 000 peacekeeping personnel operating in 12 active peacekeeping missions around the globe. In addition, apart from protecting civilians, peacekeeping missions also help countries experiencing armed conflict achieve lasting peace. This is achieved through the peacekeeping missions support of a political process that brings together all parties to a conflict through a negotiated peace agreement and a roadmap to post-conflict reconstruction. The presence of peacekeepers ensures that there are fewer civilians' deaths, less conduct of hostilities hence a higher chance for a negotiated peace agreement. As the move towards achieving a comprehensive PoC mandate is continuously sought, it is envisaged that UN Peacekeeping missions will have double the number of women serving the police formations and triple the number of women serving in military contingents.

Principles of peacekeeping

UN peacekeeping operations are guided by three principles which forms the basis for securing and maintaining international security and order. The first principle is consent which comes from all parties to the conflict. This ensures that the peacekeeping mission has the greenlight to deploy and undertake its duties in order meet all the mandate's objectives.

This is also a sign of that the parties to the conflict offer to commit to a political process towards ending the conflict through a settled agreement. This consent in certain conflict situations is not a guarantee of freedom of deployment especially in conflict

situations of an intra-state conflict situation where non-state armed groups have a weak governance structure and are fragmented into smaller groups divided along ethnic or religious lines (UN Peacekeeping, 2022). Impartiality is the other principle of peacekeeping which ensure that peacekeepers are impartial when undertaking their mandate during their interaction with parties to the conflict. The UN emphasizes that this does not mean that the peacekeepers should be neutral in carrying out duties related to carrying out their mandate. The third principle is that of non-use of force except in self-defence and defence of the mandate. This mandate gives peacekeepers the authority to protect the political process, civilians vulnerable to an imminent physical attack and when peacekeepers are assisting national authorities in the maintenance of law and order.

Central African Republic (CAR) at a Glance

Central Africa Republic was a French colony up until independence in 1960. In post-independence, the French still ran an influence in CAR with much of governance structures being run by the French authorities including government ministries (Carayannis & Fowlis, 2017). After the cold war, the central African state was left at the mercy of new intricacies on governance in the form of weak African leadership that fuelled ethnic and religious intolerance in CAR. This formed the basis for the current crisis that continues to plague the country. A series of military mutinies especially between 1996 – 2013 broke down any statehood and democratic principles that CAR had. International and regional interventions were futile as each intervention from the French government, the UN, and AU at different times failed to understand the underlying issues that pervaded the conflict to its deadliest period ever between 2013-2015 period. This is a period characterized by non-state armed groups direct attacks on civilians after the collapse of yet another government (Carayannis & Fowlis, 2017).

The conflict in Central Africa Republic (CAR) has had a major impact on the livelihoods of civilians comprised of men, women, girls, and boys since 2014. This has been as a result of wanton displacement, deaths and injuries; as well as destruction of infrastructure.

This necessitated the United Nations (UN) through the UN Security Council Resolution 2149 (2014) to create a mandate for Protection of Civilians (PoC) through the UN Peacekeeping force under United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA). The mandate of MINUSCA has been to protect civilians and support the transition process in CAR.

The conflict is characterized by an intra-state conflict situation complicated by the emergence of various non-state armed groups and their continued fragmentation into smaller armed groups. These groups continue to disrupt any path towards a negotiated peace process due to their perceived government's lack of political will to honour past peace agreements. The resulting impact has been an economic meltdown, poor governance and breakdown of law and order that has led to various forms of abuses against civilian rights by all parties to the conflict as well as some elements of the peacekeeping mission.

The latest MINUSCA's attempts to stabilize the country both in 2019 and 2020 have been hampered by mistrust among these parties leading to a failed peace agreement and failed election. According to UNICEF (2021) the resulting effects have led to displacement of over 200 000 civilians in 2020 and over half a million men, women, boys and girls by 2021.

According to UN (2022), the current government which came to power in 2021 continues to struggle with state stabilization which was the crucial agenda in the MINUSCA brokered 2021 Joint Road Map for Peace and the previous Khartoum Accord of 2019 in CAR that saw the appointment of a president to oversee this. Many armed groups consider this appointment illegitimate given that they insist they were not on the negotiating table when decisions were being deliberated on and decided. In addition, CAR has not had a democratic election in over 30 years.

MINUSCA mandate of PoC continues to be challenged as government forces continue to use excessive use of force on civilians, commit other human rights abuses like sexual and gender-based violence, as well target certain communities during their security operations. Continued use of children in war through forceful recruitment is also a concern that MINUSCA faces. The emergence of other external actors like the Wagner group, a private military entity undermines the role and mandate of MINUSCA in CAR. This group fuels human rights abuses alongside the CAR national army which has led to an arms embargo imposed through the UN Security Council and continues to take effect.

The use of Russian military instructors through a bi-lateral agreement between the Russian Federal Government and the CAR Government continues to hamper Security Sector Reform activities enshrined in the MINUSCA mandate (UN, 2022). The major actors in the security council of the UN reservations for Russia's involvement outside of the UN mission in CAR led to Russia's abstaining from the vote to extend MINUSCA's mandate in CAR. This intricacies by external factors are a hinderance to supporting a political negotiated peace deal that will finally end the conflict in CAR. The current ceasefire agreement continues to be

fragile as a result of these issues and the intra-state issues emanating from mistrust and lack of financial resources in CAR to finance grassroots elections, socio-economic avenues for the population to resume economic activities and social integration.

This study will seek to inform decision makers on matters of armed conflict and conflict management as well post-conflict recovery on issues of sustainable peace and security. Humanitarian actors will be informed on the role of UN Peacekeeping and how efforts by peacekeepers open logistical avenues for humanitarian action. Policymakers on conflict management will be informed on the critical role a mandate is when it comes to peacekeeping. The policymakers will be able to grasp decision-making mechanisms of both military, police and civilian components that operate within an armed conflict context. The CAR is undergoing a transition from conflict hence this paper can inform the need for all stakeholders to be included in the peace process. This is crucial for ownership of the process from all actors to avoid a relapse to a full-blown intrastate conflict.

The Conflict in Central African Republic (CAR)

(Klosowicz, 2016) avers that CAR is one of the least developed countries in Africa and this has been compounded by two intra-state conflicts in the last decade as well as weak governance institutions.

The first instance of this latest round of conflict was in 2012 when an uprising by anti-government actors brought out a rebellion orchestrated by an alliance of rebel militia factions known as the Seleka. The second instance was in 2013 by a grassroots armed group known as the Anti-Balaka instigated by attacks from the Seleka group who have since disintegrated into smaller armed groups. The anti-balaka is an alliance of four ethnic groups rooted in the colonial era struggle for independence. This bond inspired by a long tradition of resistance is made up of the Gbaya, Banda, Mandjia and Mboum ethnic groups (ICG, 2015). The fragile nature of CAR as a result of a military Coup earlier which ushered in the reign of President François Bozizé fuelled the eventual near collapse of CAR as a state. Plagued by poverty, corruption and poor health and education systems, the fabric of nationhood was torn apart. Furthermore, the conflict over the years has triggered wanton displacement of civilians especially in urban areas of the capital city of Bangui. Various attempts to manage the conflict over a decade later through UN peacekeeping has been ongoing under MINUSCA. Priority for the peacekeeping mission has been maintaining the restoring law and order, as

well as ensuring safe passage and distribution of humanitarian aid. It further seeks to support a political process that will see a peace agreement pave way for a transitional government through an agreeable timeline and peacebuilding plan (ICG, Central African Republic: Better Late Than Never, 2013).

Raleigh & Dowd, (2015) Intentional targeting of civilians in the conflict in CAR surpasses Africa's average which is estimated at 35%. It also one of the highest among countries experiencing armed conflict in Africa. The violence that has been directed at civilians in CAR also surpasses the number being targeted in the DRC. This is because the lack of law and order because of weak state structures leave few government security agents protecting citizens. Furthermore, many of the armed groups no longer have a proper command system given their continued disintegration into smaller warring factions further compounding civilian suffering.

Borderlands Issues in the Central African Republic Conflict

Throughout history, communities in the CAR and the larger Sahelian region have been characterized by interdependence amongst each other. The movement of goods and people underpinned by extreme climatic conditions has led to this population mobility. This coupled by the porous borders that are more often than not ungoverned spaces has led to the people-based security complex is driven by deep-seated human existential concerns, which connect both human security and human development needs of the populations (UNECA, 2017).

The French colonists in CAR calculated that these lands were too remote and poor to administer, and essentially left them alone, except for (often-brutal) incursions by solo officers and their guards. Little changed with independence. The fact that CAR, South Sudan and Chad rank lowly (188, 190 and 191 respectively) on the UN Human Development Index means that most of the communities will traverse these borderlands to practice their tradition such as seasonal and livestock migration and diversification of crop growing area (UNDP, 2022).

The conflict in CAR has all the hallmarks of a regional conflict formation (RCF). These include sustained violent activities, border wars, interventions. RCF's can be defined as sets of violent conflicts that form mutually reinforcing linkages with each other throughout a broader region, making for more protracted and obdurate conflicts (Barnett, Armstrong, & Ntegeye, 2001).

What specifically are borderlands? These are regions typically within 30 kilometres from international borders. Currently, there are around 270 million people living in Africa's borderlands (Africa Borderlands Centre, 2022). Alternatively, borderlands can be defined as a realm comprising of a population on the margins of power centres, traversed by a formal political boundary, living dynamic relations internally and externally (Zartman, 2010).

Armed groups attacked areas where national defence and security forces were less present or completely absent, taking advantage of the fuel crisis (UNSC, 2022). In Basse-Kotto and Ouaka Prefectures, the *Unité pour la paix en Centrafrique* sporadically attacked villages and isolated national defence forces positions. It also increased its presence around Dimbi, Basse-Koto Prefecture, a strategic area rich with natural resources, with the apparent intent to retake its former strongholds. It is important to note that of the 16 prefectures in CAR, the one's bordering South Sudan, DRC, Sudan and Chad have faced the brunt of violent conflict as the areas are isolated from the CAR's national defence forces. Furthermore Between 2 June and 1 October, MINUSCA documented and verified 402 incidents (mostly around these isolated borderland regions) representing 625 human rights violations and abuses and breached s of international humanitarian law that affected 1,552 victims, including 597 men, 133 women, 196 boys, 137 girls and 27 unidentified children; 425 unidentified civilians; and 37 groups of collective victims, causing 66 conflict-related civilian deaths and one enforced disappearance (UNSC, 2022).

Most importantly, they have afforded conflict parties the ability to conduct lucrative business in the export of natural resources, and thereby have provided sustenance and fuel for their war agendas. borderlands can easily become natural locations for the flow and settlement of refugees, as well as strategic footholds for rebels and other clandestine actors (Scorgie, 2013).

Especially in Africa, these situations tend to be exacerbated by the lack of security measures and personnel at borders. There is often a severe weakness – if not absence – of policing on many African state boundaries, at times allowing for a sudden and uncontrolled movement of volatile populations across borders. As Anderson says, 'African states lack the trained personnel, the technology and the financial resources to prevent the unauthorised movement of persons and goods across their frontiers. Movements from one state to another of starving people, ethnic groups threatened with massacre, migrant workers, guerrilla fighters, diamond smugglers, drugs and weapons dealers can threaten the interests of a neighbouring state (Anderson, 1996).

Moreover, Sudan's notorious Rapid Support Forces (RSF) paramilitary has been selling weapons and military equipment to rebels from the Central African Republic, fuelling a military build-up that could threaten the country's peace process (UNSC, 2019). Since mid-2018, 3R has expanded the territory under its control considerably, having absorbed most of the Siriri elements operating in Mambéré -Kadéi Prefecture. The armed group has also conducted several joint operations with FDPC and RJ fighters. It also took control of northwest Ouham-Pendé Prefecture, where its fighters established a supply route from Chad and gained control over the area bordering Cameroon (UNSC, 2019). Their goal was reportedly to prevent the possible incursion of Sudanese armed groups coming from South Sudan and going to Chad through CAR territory. Am Dafok is a traditional passage route for rebel groups active in the three countries (Chad, Sudan and CAR). The armed group 3R controls a significant part of the area bordering Cameroon, a key zone from which to monitor activities related to transhumance. A former Cameroonian soldier referred to as "Abdulaziz" supervises the 3R training. This individual is reportedly a former member of the Brigaded 'Intervention Rapide (BIR) who had fled Cameroun to avoid imprisonment there (UNSC, 2019).

CAR – Chad Border Issues

Threats from Armed Groups and Proliferation of SALW

Following the failed coup of 2001 that was staged by General Francois Bozize in an attempt to oust President Ange-Felix Patasse, the CAR was plunged into a political crisis. This crisis saw the Chadian border with CAR laden with cross border attacks from rebels comprised of Chadian and CAR fighters, as well as Chad Commando Units. This had far-reaching repercussions on civilian lives and livelihoods. Further in 2003, the rebels moved on an ambitious attack to capture Bangui which also failed as they were foiled by rebel movement. Movement for the Liberation of Congo (MLC) from DRC led by J.P Bemba (Carayannis & Fowlis, 2017). This shows the protracted history of the cross-border issues that CAR has endured with Chad including threats relating to proliferation of SALW. This is occasioned by the influx of non-state combatants from neighbouring states engaging in cross-border conduct of hostilities. Prior to this incident, escalated cross-border skirmishes between Chad and Sudan affected the porous CAR borders given that combatants used CAR as a

staging area for regrouping and as a hideout. This led to the formation of a European Union (EU) intervention force known as EUFOR along the North-eastern CAR – Chad region.

The collapse of the Government in CAR was also occasioned by Seleka rebels advancement to Bangui, which was mostly comprised of Chadian fighters mixed with fighters from North-eastern CAR. These two groups share common dynamics that made them share a common interest to advance towards Bangui (Carayannis & Fowlis, 2017). These cross-border dynamics had far-reaching repercussions as the armed incursion towards Bangui led to a deadlier civil war that took a religious dynamic as Christians and Muslims clashed in the capital leading to wanton destruction of property and maiming and killing of civilians caught up in the conflict.

The arming of these groups was made possible through reliance on hunting ammunition that aided their engagement in conduct of hostilities. These hunting ammunitions are smuggled from Cameroon by traders who target legal hunters but end up selling or being ambushed by various armed groups operating in CAR (Varisco, Wezeman, & Kuimova, 2022).

Pastoralist Herders

The porous CAR – Chad border is also a volatile region for pastoralists because of Fulani armed herders and Chadian Arab herders backed by Chadian high ranking government officials and Oudda, Biibe-Woyla, Hanagamba and Hontorbe subgroups. The armed herders drive large herds of cattle into CAR causing friction between CAR herders and agro-pastoralists whose crops are destroyed. The herders from Chad pay little attention to CAR demarcated pastoral routes and official CAR dispute resolution mechanisms in place. Instead, their armed cross-border forage is always a source of tension and skirmishes which worsens the already volatile border region. Furthermore, a phenomenon known as Zaraguina orchestrated by Chadian groups masterminds abduction of CAR children in the N.E region neighbouring Chad where ransom is paid in terms of cattle. This phenomenon has encouraged cattle rustling and rise of militia groups in this border area as a counter measure. In addition, young boys as a measure of retaliation and protection from abduction have formed their own militia groups. Additionally, the Zaraguina menace has driven many villagers to Cameroonian refugee camps as the CAR Government is unable to police this border effectively. Since the onset of the 2013 protracted conflict in CAR and its aftermath, impact of the crisis has been severe on the Fulani herders who have lost almost a million herd of cattle as a result of massacres and theft. Furthermore, Fulani herders becoming part of the

Seleka combatants that orchestrated human rights abuses on civilian populations stigmatized their pastoralist tag as it was viewed that they were part of expanding pastoral routes. In addition, they became targets of anti-balaka purge that saw a huge population of them massacred (DIIS, 2018).

CAR – Cameroon Border

According to the VoA, the CAR and Cameroonian government have reached an agreement to demarcate their porous border which have been a source of protracted dispute. This has brought relief given that armed groups from both sides have been harbouring in the disputed territories. Constant conflict emanating from this has left villages marooned by the threat of sporadic skirmishes orchestrated by fleeing CAR rebel groups. The threat has also been made worse by the rebel groups infiltrating refugee camps accommodating CAR refugees in Cameroon (VoA, 2022) (VoA, Cameroon, CAR Join Forces to Fight Rebels on Border, 2022). The issue of disputed territories is a major threat to refugee populations given that the continued use of these territory which are close to the refugee camps would have seen continued infiltration into the camps. The local villages whose livelihoods were impacted before the demarcation had the threat of being accommodated close to the refugee camps as Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) leaving the Cameroonian and UNHCR in a dilemma on how to protect these civilians.

Central African Republic – Sudan Border Issues

The border between the Central African Republic (CAR) and Sudan has long been a source of tension and disputes. This borderland region is home to a diverse population with different ethnic and religious backgrounds, as well as rich in resources such as oil, timber, and minerals. This has led to conflicts between local communities and government or private actors seeking to exploit these resources. This has led to a loss of livelihoods for many people and has also contributed to environmental degradation (CNN, 2022).

However, the border region is also affected by violence and instability, which has led to a humanitarian crisis and has made it difficult for communities to access vital resources and markets. The crisis in CAR has caused displacement of 518,000 people with another 3,100,000 in need of humanitarian assistance (UNOCHA, 2022).

The humanitarian crisis on the border between Sudan and the Central African Republic is a result of ongoing conflict and instability in both countries. Additionally, there have been reports of human rights abuses, including sexual violence and forced recruitment of children into armed groups (Yahia & Daghar, 2020). The situation is further complicated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which has made it more difficult for aid organizations to provide assistance (UNOCHA, 2022).

Another issue is ethnic and religious tensions. The border region is home to a diverse population and there have been tensions between these groups. These tensions have been exacerbated by the ongoing conflicts and violence in the region, which have created a climate of fear and mistrust. This has led to human rights abuses and has made it difficult for communities to live together in peace (ACCORD, 2013).

The cross-border movement is also an issue. The border region is also home to many nomadic and pastoralist communities, who have traditionally moved across the border with their livestock. However, border closures and restrictions on movement have made it difficult for these communities to access vital resources and markets. This has led to a decline in their livelihoods and has also hindered the economic development of the region (ACCORD, 2013).

Security is another concern. The border region has been affected by violence and instability, and there have been reports of armed groups and criminal networks operating in the area. The security situation has also been complicated by the ongoing conflict in Sudan and the ongoing civil war in CAR and Chad (Abdallatif, 2022). The presence of these groups has led to human rights abuses and has made it difficult for people to live and work in the region safely (UNOCHA, 2022).

Finally, the ongoing violence and instability in the border region has led to a humanitarian crisis. The displacement of thousands of people, who have been forced to flee their homes in search of safety, has led to a humanitarian crisis, with many people in need of assistance. The crisis has been exacerbated by the lack of access to basic services such as healthcare and education, as well as the lack of food and clean water (UNOCHA, 2022).

In conclusion, the border between CAR and Sudan is a complex and multifaceted issue, with a range of challenges that need to be addressed. The issues of resource competition, ethnic and religious tensions, cross-border movement, security concerns and humanitarian crisis, if not addressed properly will continue to fuel the instability and violence in CAR and the region. A comprehensive approach, which takes into account the needs and perspectives of all stakeholders, is needed to address these issues and promote peace and stability in the border region.

Central African Republic – Congo Republic Border Issues

The Central African Republic (CAR) and the Congo Republic (also known as the Republic of the Congo) share a border that has been the source of ongoing tensions and disputes. One of the key issues is the question of sovereignty and control over certain areas, particularly the region known as the "tri-border" area where the two countries' borders meet with those of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Both countries claim certain areas as their own, leading to disagreements over land and resources. This issue has been ongoing for many years and has resulted in tensions between the two countries. In recent years, there have been efforts to resolve the dispute through negotiations and mapping exercises, but a final resolution has yet to be reached (UNHCR, 2016).

Another significant issue is the presence of armed groups operating in the border regions, which have been accused of committing human rights abuses and fuelling instability. The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a Ugandan rebel group, has been active in the border areas of CAR and Congo, and has been responsible for more than 100,000 deaths, the abduction of between 60,000 to 100,000 children, and the displacement of as many as 2.5 million civilians between 1987 and 2012 (Global Centre for The Responsibility To Protect, 2019).

Illegal logging is a significant issue on the border between the Central African Republic and the Republic of Congo. Loggers often operate in protected areas, clearing large swaths of forest for valuable hardwoods such as rosewood and ebony. This not only damages the environment but also has a negative impact on local communities who depend on the forest for their livelihoods. The sector has serious governance problems, and this is reflected in the estimated levels of illegal logging on the Congolese side could be as high as 70% (Lawson, 2014). Moreover, when the Seleka rebel coalition took over in CAR in 2013-14, international timber traders paid them at least 3.4 million euros in protection fees to continue their harvesting and exporting operations (Global Witness, 2015). This reinforced the rebels' presence and also facilitated arms trafficking bankrolled from illegal logging sales. After the Seleka lost power, Anti-Balaka militias were also reportedly paid to provide protection (Browne, Kelly, & Pilgram, 2022).

Efforts to address these issues have been hindered by a lack of trust and cooperation between the two countries, as well as a lack of resources and capacity on the part of both governments. However, in recent years, there have been some efforts to improve relations

and address these issues through dialogue and joint initiatives. For example, in 2017, the two countries signed an agreement to establish a Joint Border Security Committee to improve coordination and cooperation on border security (UNSC, 2018).

Central African Republic – Democratic Republic of Congo Border Issues

The Democratic Republic of Congo- CAR border has not changed since both States' independence in 1960. The border follows the Oubanghi and M'Bomou Rivers, spanning 1,792 km, (Sovereign Limits, n.d.).

The uptick in fighting plaguing both countries has subjected their relationship to that of cross-border movements taking more of a refugee nature than a transhumance one. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' database on the refugees under their mandate (n.d.), as of 2022, the DRC refugees in CAR were 6,298 while the refugees from CAR to DRC were 207,054. In 2019, UNHCR and its partners began voluntary returns of CAR refugees in DRC, however, due to COVID-19 and a reappearance of electoral violence in CAR in December 2020, the process was halted. In October 2021, they facilitated the voluntary return of over 5,500 Central African refugees from the Inke, Mole and Boyabu camps in DRC's North and South Ubangi Provinces, (Achu, 2022). Some CAR refugees in DRC have settled along the Ubangi river, in the Congolese districts of Gbadolite and Mobayi-Mbongo where they are somewhat out of UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations reach and on occasion cross to back to CAR often facing violence by armed groups on the way or upon their temporary return to the country, (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2018).

The border regions have been affected by violence and instability. Violence in the southern border areas of Central African Republic is driving more people to flee, including into remote areas of northern Democratic Republic of the Congo. The presence of armed groups such as the LRA and its splinter groups has led to displacement in both countries. The LRA is a Ugandan rebel group operating in the border region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the Central African Republic (CAR), and South Sudan. According to Invisible Children -an NGO focused on the LRA-, there exists two prominent splinter factions in the region. One LRA splinter faction maintains a base in CAR where it has on occasions launched attacks into DRC while the other independently operates out of a camp in northern DRC next to the CAR border, (2021).

The escalation of LRA activities has led to the disruption of life due to violence and kidnappings characterized by roadside ambushes and attacks on communities, (ReliefWeb,2010). According to Crisis Tracker (2020), from April to May, the LRA systematically carried out ambushes and lootings along key routes and within communities in DRC and in the neighbouring areas of CAR.

The kidnappings have introduced a new challenge to an already complex conflict dynamic, that of repatriation and family reunification processes. In 2020, LRA groups abducted more than 180 people, majorly adults used to porter looted goods, and released them after a week or so. Children and youth on the other hand have been kept on for longer periods with 108 of them still missing from 2018-2021(2021). Reports of brutality within the factions have led to a rise in the number of escapees, of whom a substantial number are left in the lurch as many escape in a country other than the one in which they were abducted, (Invisible Children, 2017). In 2017, returnees, three children included, were stuck in the Mbomou-Uele border region following stalling of the repatriation and family reunification processes. Factors contributing to the stall include, the remote nature of the border regions making it difficult for humanitarian organizations to access, prolonged conflicts in the communities some were abducted from, and lastly a step back by donors and partners in matters LRA, (Invisible Children, 2017). In study conducted by the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa Research on the life of LRA returnees in Uganda, DRC, South Sudan and CAR, returnees are subjected to rejection, trauma and denial of access to family assets such as land,(Owiny, 2022).

Despite being riddled by conflict and sharing common enemies in the form of armed groups, there is no evidence of CAR-DRC government collaborations in addressing their border issues.

Engaging Local Humanitarian Actors in Complex Protracted Armed Conflicts

While international actors continue to struggle with what ails CAR, the largely ignored local humanitarian actors space sits on a wealth of knowledge as stakeholders in the pursuit of peace and conflict. This has led to numerous failed peace accords as well as conflict management strategies fronted by both regional and international actors through intervention mechanisms (Piquard, 2022). The need to collect data and understand local actors especially on humanitarian issues can help external stakeholders understand the conflict tree that fuels an intra-state conflict. Responding to the needs of the local population, men, women, boys,

and girls can be informed by the data shared and disseminated to the intervention mechanisms be they regional or international.

Adebajo (2011) states that there were thirteen peacekeeping missions around the world with the first being the deployment of troops to manage the Suez Canal crisis of 1956. He also avers that, the term peacekeeping was not a part of the UN Charter hence peacekeeping was loosely referred to as “chapter six and a half” signifying the fact that its provisions fell between chapter six on pacific avenues of conflict resolution, and use of force under chapter seven. Deployment to African conflicts has been vital to ensuring that intra-state dynamics in armed conflict are managed through an impartial actor. This is characterized by the third generation of peacekeeping that evolved in 1999 with deployment to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Boutros Boutros-Ghali, a former UN Secretary General has had a great input on the peacekeeping agenda for Africa including Agenda for peace published in 1992 that informed on the techniques and tools for enhanced peacekeeping, peacebuilding and peace-making.

The peace action plan emphasized on the need for using regional mechanisms as means for deployment for missions as well as employing peace enforcement as a tool for intervening in highly volatile conduct of hostilities in intra-state conflicts. Kofi Annan, another former UN Secretary General uncovered another milestone that brought in the agenda for regional capacity building mechanisms for regional peacekeeping actors in Africa. This brought in the aspect of a regional stand-by force made of five sub-regional bodies within Africa. These are tasked with deploying sub-regional troops within their geographical space for a faster and efficient deployment of troops as measure of de-escalating a conflict as well as managing it at a less lethal stage.

According to (Gorur, 2019), there are principles that guide peacekeeping operations on deployment of peacekeepers. These principles ensure that a systematic deployment is achieved with a view of having a sustainable conflict management effort that involves consent from the host state, impartiality of the peacekeepers as well as non-use of force unless in self-defence, or in defence of the mandate. These principles are the greatest factors that give legitimacy to peacekeeping.

Peacekeeping Mandate on Protection of Civilians (PoC)

According to Kullenberg (2021), the new aspects of international peacekeeping are led by a mandate which prioritizes the Protection of Civilians (PoC) in any intervention of an armed

conflict. This protection is based on the various vulnerabilities and special needs each aspect needs in terms of children (boys and girls) under the Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) Agenda; the general victims of armed conflict under PoC, and protection of women and girls within the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Agenda. WPS focuses on the UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 (2000) and is directly related to enhancing protection, participation, and protection.

(Day & Hunt, (2022) opine that for peacekeepers to enhance PoC, there are threats they must address as part of their respective mandate goals. Protection failures in Rwanda (1994 genocide) and CAR (2013 – 2016). Civilians are most of the displaced during conflict and are directly targeted by combatants and other criminal groups who take advantage of the breakdown of law and order during intra-state conflict of a protracted nature. Therefore peacekeepers must ensure protection mechanisms are in place even when working on achieving the larger aspect of their respective mandates.

In CAR, WPS was instrumental in the protection of women and girls against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA) by UN Peacekeepers (Karuma, 2016). The PoC mandate was heavily compromised when peacekeepers within some Troop Contributing Countries (TCC) and Police Contributing Countries (PCC) began sexually exploiting and abusing civilians, most of whom were women, girls and boys. Widespread reports of these abuses led to a report tabled to the UN Secretary General which brought out far reaching recommendations and action in 2016 on the future of peacekeeping.

United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic in CAR

In 2013, armed conflict of an intra-state nature erupted in CAR and was mainly devastating around the capital city of Bangui. In 2014, the international community noted the breach of international peace and the suffering that civilians were enduring the violence. The hostilities between Seleka and the Anti-balaka armed groups escalated to a religiously instigated direct targeting of civilians in an environment that had an African Union led mission (African-led International Support Mission in the Central African Republic - MISCA). MISCA failure led to MINUSCA taking over the peace support operations mantle in CAR within the auspices and mandate of UNSCR 2149 (2014).

There has been multiple reports of International Humanitarian Law violations and Human Rights abuses from 2016 up to the time leading to the renewal of the mandate in

2021. Over 200 annual deaths and 10 000 cases of displacement were reported in different areas of CAR emanating from direct attacks on civilians (MINUSCA, 2017). Furthermore, 100 deaths from attacks on Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camp in 2018 brought out the threat caused by armed groups. These groups also loot and pillage homes, infrastructure and institutions worsening the destructive nature of the armed conflict (MINUSCA, 2019).

MINUSCA's mandate has been extended to a further 12 months under UNSC Resolution 2605 (2021) and will run until November 2022. The extension though unanimous, had two notable members abstaining during the vote (China and Russia). MINUSCA currently has 14 400 military, 3020 Police and 108 corrections officers. Using these resource persons, the extended mission mandate will enhance conditions suitable for ensuring support for the full implementation of the 2019 peace Agreement. This is a political settlement that will usher in reconciliation path as well as de-escalate the threat posed by armed groups in the country. It also mandates the full protection of civilians caught in the conflict including the promotion and protection of human rights. This comes at the backdrop of the 2016 sexual exploitation and abuse cases against women and girls that perpetrated by both armed groups and peacekeeping personnel as well as humanitarian actors (UN, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

Relative Deprivation Theory

Relative Deprivation is defined as the conscious feeling of negative discrepancy between legitimate expectations and present actualities.

Relative Deprivation proponents believe that political discontent and its consequences (protests, instability, violence, revolution) depend not only on the absolute level of economic well-being, but also on the distribution of wealth.

Relative deprivation theory suggests that people who feel they are being deprived of something considered essential in their lives (Human rights, political voice, access to resources) may organize or join social movements or armed conflicts dedicated to obtaining the things of which they feel deprived.

The theory is cited as a factor driving incidents of social disorder like looting, and civil wars. In this nature, social movements and their associated disorderly acts can often be attributed to the grievances of people who feel they are being denied resources to which they are entitled. The main assumptions of this theory state that conflict is not merely a passing social event but an inseparable part of the human experience. Therefore, when the population

is living in conditions rife for conflict, then the underlying causes of this conflict will be fuelling it until it is addressed.

Furthermore, relative deprivation and inequality are responsible for the manifestation of conflict, political violence, and growth of armed groups. As stated above, when structural violence dictates the modus operandi of the state, the marginalized and oppressed in the population will rebel, take up arms, and attempt to fight the system that is impeding their rights at a social, political and economic level.

Thus, conflict has its own foundations in people's mind in that people or communities who feel deprived of some essentials tend to conflict and engage in armed conflict to improve their chances of attaining better conditions. As stated earlier, CAR is one of the poorest countries in Africa as a result of weak governance and intra-state conflict. The MINUSCA continues to stabilize the country as negotiations continue for a peace deal, and road map to emerging out of the conflict.

Various actors including non-state armed groups, local humanitarian actors, state actors, regional mechanisms among others mentioned above have been part and parcel of the efforts. Addressing inequalities and fostering a state identity can enhance this theory's perspectives on the cause of armed conflict and explain the need for protection of civilians in CAR. This has been witnessed in the humanitarian, peacekeeping and capacity building that has been going on in CAR.

Conclusion

Overall, the conflict in CAR and the greater Sahel region is a complex and deeply entrenched issue that requires a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach to address. This includes addressing the underlying economic and social issues that fuel the conflict, as well as addressing the threat posed by extremist groups and the need for effective governance and security.

Peacekeeping is an avenue for conflict management and post-conflict recovery. It has given CAR a political process that has been in the making since armed conflict erupted in 2013. Engaging non-state armed groups in the political process ensures that, and an enhanced negotiated agreement provides for protection of civilians. During the peacekeeping process, the humanitarian process is also guaranteed to help civilians in dire need of assistance given that the impartial nature of peacekeeping opens up all areas controlled by parties to the conflict to ceasefire.

As observed, peacekeeping also has its shortcomings on PoC, through human rights abuses like the SEA on women, girls, and boys. This was widely reported and perpetrated by MINUSCA personnel as well as other actors including humanitarian and parties to the conflict. It is through local humanitarian actors that these abuses were documented. These actors have first-hand information on issues affecting civilians in conflict especially at the grassroots level. All these actors need to protect civilians as well as safeguard the political process to end armed conflict.

With peacekeeping comes the mandate of protection of civilians and the need to ensure that in the midst of hostilities, their normal lives continue. In addition, a political solution to the conflict is the most sustainable avenue for protecting civilians in armed conflict.

The overlapping and over layering of mandates CAR is a problem that has exacerbated the continued protracted nature of the conflict. This has left the fate of the civilians in a vulnerable state with threats from armed groups, criminal gangs, weak governance, and rouge peacekeepers looming everyday a peace deal is not ratified.

The borderland issues between the Central African Republic, Chad, Cameroon, the Congo Republic, and Sudan are complex and multifaceted, and include disputes over sovereignty and control, the presence of armed groups, displacement of civilians, banditry, competition for resources over pasture, kidnapping, as well as proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) and other illegal activities. Addressing these issues will require sustained efforts from these countries, regional mechanisms within ECCAS, as well as the support of the international community. CAR being a PSO environment has the MINUSCA mandate threatened by dynamics surrounding the borderlands issues herein.

The security situation in the eastern part of Chad and parts of the Central African Republic has deteriorated dramatically over the years. However, this is not primarily due to a spill-over of the conflict from the neighboring Darfur Region, but rather an escalation of pre-existing national conflicts, proliferation of illegal arms, and competition for resources over pasture. While the crisis in the Central African Republic is of a predominantly intra-state nature, the growing interrelation between the conflicts in Darfur and Chad has given rise to a new conflict system that can only be resolved by addressing the underlying causes within the different theatres unfolding in the respective countries and using the regional mechanisms to simultaneously foster improved relations among the states.

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About the authors

Watson Karuma Karomba is an Alumni of The United States International University-Africa (USIU-A) and holds a Bachelors' Degree in International Relations with a Double Concentration (Major) in Peace & Conflict Studies, and Development Studies. He is set to graduate with a master's degree in International Relations with a Concentration in Peace & Conflict Studies from the same institution. Mr Karuma is currently an Assistant Researcher with the Peace and Security Research Department (PSRD) at the International Peace Support Training Centre (IPSTC). He has published on various thematic issues including Response Mechanisms to Climate Change Related Conflicts in the Horn of Africa, COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on women and girls, Sexual exploitation and abuse of women and girls in the Central Africa Republic; and enhancing capacity for child protection practitioners in armed conflict within the Peace Support Operations Arena.

He has also contributed to research in areas including Irregular Migration and its impact on regional security, Enhancing women participation in community peacebuilding, as well as predisposition of women and girls to violent extremism in Kenya. Mr Karuma has been involved in conducting a Training Needs Assessment in Mombasa County for a Women Community Peace building course intended by IPSTC for the County. In addition, he has vast experience in planning for conferences, symposia, and workshops including the 2022 Children, Peace, and Security Regional Conference. Mr Karuma has also contributed to the Centre's Newsletter through various articles on the plight of women refugees and another on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of civilians in Peace Support Operations. He is currently part of the editorial team for the newsletter and the Africa Amani Journal.

Furthermore, Mr Karuma has attended various courses, workshops and seminars as well as symposia focusing on the peace and security landscape in Eastern Africa where he has gained immense experience on the same. Some of the areas he has gained insight include gender mainstreaming and research, Child Protection in Peace Support Operations, Sexual and Gender Based Violence in Peace Support Operations, Human Rights in Early Warning, and Gender as a tool for Management of SALW. Finally, he is a certified SGBV Trainer of Trainer.

Ogaye Martin is a Research Assistant at the International Peace Support Training Centre (IPSTC) with a keen interest in international relations, foreign policy, and diplomacy. He holds a Master of Arts in International Relations with an integrated major in Foreign Policy

& Diplomacy, Peace & Conflict Studies and Development Studies, and a Bachelor of Arts in International Relations with a Major in Foreign Policy & Diplomacy, both from the United States International University - Africa in Nairobi, Kenya.

Martin's major skills and competencies include intensive writing and research, as evidenced by his contributions to various publications and conferences Martin currently serves as an Editorial Assistant of IPSTC's Africa Amani Journal (AAJ) and the Convener of IPSTC's AAJ Webinar Series.

Martin has also been actively involved in various capacity-building courses and training, including Conflict Analysis & Prevention and Basic Child Protection Course at IPSTC, Basic First Aid Training at African Medical & Research Foundation (AMREF), Ethics in Peace Operations, Introduction to the UN System: Orientation for Serving on a UN Field Mission, and Peacekeeping and International Conflict Resolution from Peace Operations Training Institute, and Strategic Thinking from the Project Management Institute.

In addition to his professional achievements, Martin has been a speaker at the 2020 African Studies Association of Africa conference held at USIU-Africa and served as the Research Secretariat/Organizing Committee of the Regional Research Conference on Children, Peace, and Security.

Dr Michael Sitawa is a senior researcher at IPSTC in the Peace and Security Research Department of the International Peace Support Training Centre. He is a senior lecturer and was Acting Head of Programme of Postgraduate Studies School leading the MA Programme in Crisis Response and Disaster Management of the National Defence University-Kenya. He holds a PhD in Sociology (Kenyatta University) and a Master of Arts degree in Sociology (University of Nairobi). He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Social Sciences (major in Sociology, minor in Political Science) (The Catholic University of Eastern Africa). He has worked with the African Union Mission in Somalia on capacity building for Somalia's Interim government as well as Youth Leadership. He has also consulted for the National Council of Churches of Kenya assessing the conflict trends and the effect of the Peace Education Program in the five refugee camps in Dadaab, Northern Kenya. This was from

2003-2014 funded by UNHCR and UNICEF. He is a chief editor of Africa Amani Journal of IPSTC.

Kirongothi Catherine is a dynamic professional with a Bachelor's degree in International Relations from United States International University (USIU-A), specializing in Foreign Policy & Diplomacy, and a minor in Development Studies. Her relentless pursuit of knowledge and expertise is reflected in her participation in various training programs and capacity-building courses.

Driven by a genuine interest in sustainable development, climate action, and global affairs, Catherine possesses a passion that fuels her work. She has continuously developed her skill set, completing courses such as Introduction to the UN System and Gender Perspectives in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations from the Peace Operations Training Institute, Climate Change, Peace and Security: Understanding Climate-Related Security Risks Through an Integrated Lens from the UN CC: Learn, as well as Peace Mediation for Diplomats at IPSTC.

Catherine's key strengths lie in project management, intensive research and writing, and effective communication, enabling her to convey complex ideas with clarity and impact. Her exceptional writing and research abilities have been demonstrated through her contributions to publications and conferences, where she has played an instrumental role in advancing the field of sustainability and promoting youth engagement. As an Editorial Trainee for IPSTC, Catherine has made significant contributions to the publication of the Africa Amani Journal (AAJ). Her dedication to academic and research endeavors is exemplified by her role as a USIU Game Centre Student Research Intern and her representation of USIU at the Education for Public Inquiry (EPIIC) symposium in 2020, where she led a team in presenting a paper on Kenya, focusing on the prevention of genocide and mass atrocities.

Catherine's commitment to making a positive impact extends beyond her professional achievements. She has actively volunteered her time and expertise, working with organizations such as Resala Charity Organization in Egypt through AIESEC and leading various projects as part of her involvement with Rotaract. These projects encompass diverse

areas, including peace and conflict resolution, environmental support, disease prevention, education, and community development. In her role as a Research and Project Assistant at IPSTC, Catherine has further solidified her position as a dedicated contributor to the field. Her active involvement in academic and research communities has allowed her to stay at the forefront of knowledge and innovation.

Committed to continuous learning and personal growth, Catherine is currently pursuing a Diploma in Project Management from the Kenya Institute of Management. Her willingness to embrace new ideas and approaches, coupled with her determination and expertise, make her a valuable asset in driving positive change and shaping a more sustainable future.