

SPIRALLING VIOLENCE IN CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC'S NORTH EAST

New York/ Bangui 22 June 2009: Dawn attacks on the 21st of June on the town of Birao in the Central African Republic (CAR)'s remote north east have emptied the town of most of its population, left 3 civilians and at least 6 members of the armed forces wounded and over a hundred homes burnt to the ground. Humanitarian personnel were evacuated to the MINURCAT base in the second major attack on Birao this month, amidst heightened concern about humanitarian actions in this impoverished border region.

The town falls under the mandate of the UN mission in the Central African Republic and Chad (MINURCAT); the Togolese UN troops provided protection for 15 humanitarian staff whose compounds are in close proximity to the Birao base shared by 80 personnel from CAR's armed forces and the former rebel group the UFDR (Union of Democratic Forces for Community) which came under fire.

The spate of attacks reflects increasing tension between ethnic groups allied to one of the main signatories to CAR's peace agreement, the UFDR, and the other main ethnic group in the region – tension which had already surfaced on the 6th of June when an assault on the same base left scores wounded and many houses burnt, 1,500 fled their homes due to the violence.

Vakaga prefecture is a porous region bordering Sudan and Chad, largely cut off from the rest of CAR during the upcoming rainy season. Humanitarian operations in Vakaga were already under threat due to security problems which emerged in early April when the vehicle of a medical humanitarian organization was attacked about 12 kilometers from the prefecture's main town Birao. Four more attacks on humanitarians followed, leading to a suspension of most operations outside of Birao town.

Although MINURCAT troops have a mandate to protect humanitarian agencies in the Vakaga prefecture and the northern part of neighbouring Haute Kotto, limited access to helicopters has meant that the UN troops which took over from EUFOR in mid March have not been able to fulfill their mandate in their full zone of operations outside of Birao town.

The United Nations humanitarian mission in the Central African Republic has expressed its deep concern about the spiraling violence in Vakaga, a region where an estimated 60,000 people are in need of help.

UN Special Representative Victor Angelo who is also the head of MINURCAT flew to CAR's capital Bangui on Monday 22nd of June for an urgent meeting with the country's President and government officials to discuss the deteriorating security situation.

'MINURCAT re-iterates its commitment to provide security for civilians and humanitarians in CAR's north east,' said Mr. Angelo in Bangui. 'Our meetings here have included discussion about the Central African government's commitment to a stronger presence in the north east, a presence which will help to mitigate the violence as well as facilitate conflict resolution.'

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