

Opening remarks by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein at a press conference in the Central African Republic

Bangui, 4 September 2015

Good morning, and thank you for coming.

This is my first visit to the Central African Republic, where the human rights situation, while far better than it was at the height of the conflict in late 2013 and early 2014, is still a cause of intense anxiety for both CAR's own inhabitants and the United Nations.

At the end of a fairly short visit, I will not attempt to cover all aspects of the human rights situation here, but I would like to focus on certain key areas where I believe there are opportunities that should be seized and a need for urgent attention.

First of all it is important to recognize that there have been several positive developments over the past year and a half. The transitional Government can claim a number of baseline achievements: the most notable among these include the local consultations that were launched in January, which involved people from 16 prefectures in addition to all eight districts of Bangui and displaced people. In May, this process was taken to another level by the Bangui Forum. Involving representatives of a broad cross-section of society, this produced an important set of recommendations which provide a principled and coherent path for CAR to follow as it attempts to establish peace and security, justice and reconciliation – all of which are essential if the country is to make a definitive and durable break with its turbulent, poverty-stricken and at times exceptionally violent past. The Bangui Forum also made a number of key recommendations related to the new Constitution and the forthcoming elections, which were upheld by the National Transitional Council. I welcome the decision of the Constitutional Court on refugees' right to vote and on the ineligibility of the transitional political leadership to stand for the Presidency.

On the security front, the United Nations mission in CAR, MINUSCA, has now amassed 9,200 troops and 1,580 police, in addition to a sizeable civilian staff. This is the most significant effort by the UN in the history of this country.

The security situation, while very far from ideal, has nevertheless improved. When my predecessor, Navi Pillay, came here in March 2014, UN human rights staff were largely confined to Bangui, with only occasional visits to some other larger towns. International forces were simply too thin on the ground to provide security. We now have nine permanently staffed offices across the country, with a further three due to open up in the coming months.

But, I think almost everyone agrees, the improvements are too gradual and the achievements are extremely tentative and fragile, or in some cases only exist on paper.

The country is still gripped with fear, and its people remain terribly divided after a conflict that tore apart the existing social, cultural, political and economic structures and led to the forced displacement of close to 1million people, in most cases along religious or ethnic lines. More than 800,000 are still displaced, more than half of them now as refugees in neighbouring countries.

One of my first meetings here was with local civil society groups. They were admirably outspoken, as civil society should be. The UN, they all agreed, can and should do better. The Government should also do better. In fact, we all should be doing much better.

I wholeheartedly agree. And here's why.

While security has undoubtedly improved, it is still extremely poor in some places, particularly those plagued with armed groups, some of which have in effect set themselves up as de facto local authorities, and are able to operate with almost total impunity. They may not be killing people on the scale they have done in the past, but they are still killing people from time to time. They are still looting civilian property and the country's mineral resources, raiding and killing cattle, and preying on civilian populations in other ways as well. Their impact on the economy has been devastating.

Many people I met this week have lamented the UN's and Government's failure so far to rein in the armed groups, and the very halting efforts at disarmament. While some people have been arrested and charged with crimes, for the most part they have been the small fry. The most notorious leaders, with much blood on their hands, are not being arrested, let alone prosecuted, tried and convicted.

While one should not underestimate the difficulty of dealing with a significant number of very violent and battle-hardened men, I believe there needs to be a much more robust approach towards these groups, so that they start to understand that they cannot continue to flout the rule of law whenever, wherever, and however they like. MINUSCA needs to be reinforced with both personnel and material so they can make good on the strong Chapter 7 mandate bestowed on them by the Security Council. The States who have promised, but still not provided, the full complement of UN peacekeeping troops and police, and vital equipment such as attack helicopters, should step up their efforts to do so, as they are sorely needed. The various anti-Balaka and ex-Seleka forces, the LRA, and the myriad other armed groups and splinter groups, need to be shown that their lawless behaviour will no longer be tolerated by the Government and the international forces who are together tasked with bringing sustainable peace to CAR. Disarmament should be an absolute priority.

Notorious criminals and killers must be brought to justice, no matter what group they belong to, both to halt their depredations and to provide deterrence. But for this to happen, both current and future Governments and their international supporters, including my own Office, need to step up their efforts to install a justice system that works. If international forces begin arresting leading

members of armed groups, there needs to be a functioning justice system to investigate, prosecute and bring judgement in fair trials, and adequate prisons in which to detain them. Currently, still, in many parts of the country there are no prosecutors or judges at all. In other areas, there is one but not the other. And in areas where there are both, they are often still unable to function because they are intimidated and threatened by the armed groups and other criminals.

As part of the follow-up to the Bangui Forum, we are currently co-hosting an important three-day international seminar on the fight against impunity, which is placing a sharp spotlight on that particularly pressing issue. I will not repeat here the key points I made in my opening speech (<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=16372&LangID=E>) on Wednesday, but I hope that the conclusions of the seminar, which has involved many international experts as well as CAR government and judicial officials and members of civil society will help stimulate a more rapid advance in the area of justice and accountability. One very concrete step in the fight against impunity, the setting up of a Special Criminal Court, involving both national and international judges, is still a long way from actually becoming operational. And, as participants in the International Seminar have recognized, the Special Court by itself will not be enough, as it will only be able to handle the most serious cases. A properly functioning local law enforcement and justice system is indispensable. I will be urging the international community to provide full support to both crucial initiatives.

Justice and security are inextricably linked, and it is clear we all need to do much more to turn around the current vicious circle of violence and impunity.

Some members of the Government whom I've met this week have been very frank about the persistent weaknesses of the State, especially in the areas of justice and accountability.

Even here in Bangui, the capital, there are still very major problems. Over the past two days I visited two of the most emblematic and worrying Bangui locations: the over-crowded and surrounded PK 5 Muslim enclave – the last major Muslim presence in the capital – and the Mpoko camp for internally displaced people abutting the main international airport. Mpoko originally contained some 120,000 people, living in deplorable conditions. While the camp's population has now been reduced to some 11,000 people, they are, for the most part, the most vulnerable, including the sick, elderly and child-headed families. Their future, and the future of PK 5 are inextricably linked, as many of the almost exclusively Christian displaced people in Mpoko come from the 3rd District which includes PK 5 and are afraid to go back to what is now a mostly Muslim enclave, whose inhabitants are equally afraid of them.

For their part, the Muslims in PK 5 are often too afraid to leave the enclave. As a result, they have nowhere to bury their dead, and are deprived of schooling and job opportunities for young and old alike. They have no access to a hospital, and women are forced to give birth at home, and Muslims displaced from other parts of the capital, with no prospect of returning home, have led to a swollen

population living in despair of the present and fear of the future.

The Christians displaced to Mpoko, in addition to fearing for their safety, also in most cases have nothing to return to: most of their houses were burned to the ground, and those that were not are occupied by others; their property was stolen; and even their water supply is contaminated by the presence of dead bodies in wells.

Here again, I believe we, the UN, and the Government must do more to find solutions. For the Christians to return home, and for the Muslims to accept them, there must be strenuous efforts to bring about reconciliation, and greatly increased security. In addition, the Christians cannot possibly go back to completely destroyed homes and polluted wells. I call on the Government, civil society and religious leaders, with the assistance of the UN, to redouble their efforts to resolve these issues.

I was therefore alarmed to hear that the Government has told the remaining inhabitants of Mpoko camp they must leave by 15 September. This would be a very dangerous step, as it could inflame the existing tensions among both groups, and would very likely end in violence. I have urged the Government to listen to the pleas of the humanitarian agencies operating in Mpoko, and give them sufficient time to execute an orderly, phased and voluntary emptying of the camp. The Government's wish to reclaim land abutting the country's only international airport, not least for security reasons, is understandable, but if it is mishandled it could have a devastating effect -- not just on the affected people, but also on the peace process in general. I was, therefore, pleased to hear from the Prime Minister yesterday that the Government intends to reconsider the draconian deadline for the closure of Mpoko.

Finally, as you are probably aware, I announced yesterday that yet another alleged case of sexual abuse or exploitation by a foreign soldier has emerged. While in this particular case the perpetrator is alleged to be a soldier serving with the Sangaris, who operate separately from the UN forces here in CAR, UN soldiers have also been involved in a series of cases of alleged sexual and other forms of abuse. The Secretary-General has made his shame and disgust at these crimes clear, and I would like to add mine. There is no excuse, no mitigating circumstances, nothing at all to justify the acts themselves or the failure to apply punishments that fit the crime.

We simply have to do better. And States must help us. Over the years many proposals have been made to improve the way we deal with this issue that so often bedevils peace-keeping operations, not least ways to deter and prevent these appalling acts against defenceless people we are supposed to be protecting. We preach the importance of combatting impunity, yet -- in the case of our own soldiers -- we more often than not totally fail to do so. Unfortunately, the Member States of the United Nations have repeatedly refused to adopt proposed measures to radically reduce the occurrence of sexual abuse by peacekeepers. I believe it is high time to revisit these ideas, and to do so as a matter of urgency. Earlier this morning, I discussed these issues at length with the UN Force

Commander and Deputy Police Commander. The new Special Representative of the Secretary-General is going to join us in a few minutes to tell you more about the MINUSCA side of this problem, and I will be happy to elaborate on some of the measures that have been proposed in the past to try to eradicate it, but which have been rejected by the UN Member States or by individual troop-contributing countries.

The conduct of the upcoming elections will be a crucial test of CAR's progress towards peace and democracy. Yesterday I met with many of the country's political party leaders and reminded them that they too bear a large responsibility on their shoulders. We are here to help, but we will only achieve peace and respect of human rights if we all respect each other and work together.

Thank you for your time and I hope to return in a more upbeat mood when CAR – and the UN – have turned the corner, and this country starts to see a much brighter future shining on a near horizon.

*For more information and **media requests**, please contact:*

In Bangui: Rupert Colville (+41 79 506 10 88 / rcolville@ohchr.org) or Myriam Dessables (+236 754 36746 / dessables@un.org)

In Geneva: Ravina Shamdasani (+41 22 917 9169 / rshamdasani@ohchr.org) or Cécile Pouilly (+41 22 917 9310 / cpouilly@ohchr.org)