

2 Pastors Among Hundreds Killed as UN Takes Over Peacekeeping in CAR

The U.N. has taken over peacekeeping in the Central African Republic amid an upsurge of violence that has left scores dead, including two pastors.

Pastors Thomas Ouanam, 60, and Pierre Baptême, 46, were killed in two separate attacks nearly a week apart, attributed to Seleka rebels.

Ouanam, of the Evangelical Church of Brethren, was killed Sept. 2, when armed men stormed the northern town of Nana Bakassa. The attackers arrived on motorbikes, and for about five hours they looted properties before leaving the town, local sources told World Watch Monitor. Three other people were killed while others took refuge in the bush or in surrounding towns such as Bossangoa. Ouanam is survived by a wife and four children.

In the second attack, on Sept. 8, Baptême, a deacon and three choir members were shot dead in the compound of Elim Church, at Ngakogbo, 70 kilometers (about 43 miles) from Bambari, which was engulfed by deadly clashes in July and August.

Baptême leaves behind a wife and four children.

More than 100 people were killed—some by gunfire and others by machetes—in the attack, which sent terrorized villagers fleeing into the bush in search of safety.

Another pastor, injured during the Ngakogbo attack, explained to World Watch Monitor the circumstances of the violence.

Lucien Imbi of Apostolic Church said the trouble started Sept. 6 as Fulani herdsmen, linked with Séléka rebels, clashed with

anti-Balaka militiamen. The violence continued the following day and resulted in the death of four Fulani fighters. This prompted violent Séléka retaliation against the Christian population.

“When Séléka arrived around 12:30, we hid at Elim Church,” Imbi said. “To our surprise, three Séléka elements broke into the church and forced us to come out. They then asked each of us to state our identity.

“Then they took us, one after the other, adding: ‘What should we do with pastors when ours are killed by your brothers anti-Balaka?’ When they started to shouting, I fell on the ground. It was then I realized a bullet hit my left arm. “

“The Séléka waited for a while to ensure that we were really dead before leaving,” Imbi said. “I crawled, with great pain, to my home, leaving the lifeless bodies of Pastor Baptême and four members of his church on the ground.”

Imbi was hospitalized but said his injuries are not life threatening.

The Alliance of Evangelicals in Central Africa has condemned the killings. In a statement issued Sept. 8, the Alliance expressed concern over the “scenes of killings organized by the armed gangs, for unknown motives, and perpetrated mainly against places of worship, ecclesiastical leaders and church members.”

The document, signed by Alliance President Rev. Nicholas Guerekoyame, also questioned the implementation of the ceasefire agreement signed July 27 in Brazzaville by the Central African Republic’s armed groups.

It also called on the transitional authorities to protect all citizens. It urged international forces to fully implement their United Nations mandate, which requires the protection of citizens, the disarmament of armed groups, and implementation

of the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration process.

It is in this volatile climate that, on Monday, the U.N. took over peacekeeping operations. Some 6,000 troops already deployed in CAR have swapped their green African Union helmets for the blue of the U.N. In total, 12,000 troops are expected to form the U.N. force, called MINUSCA after its French acronym.

The deployment of U.N. troops has received a cautious welcome.

"The switch from A.U. to U.N. peacekeepers must be more than a cosmetic change, the swapping green berets for blue helmets. Instead, it must serve as a fresh start for the peacekeeping operation in CAR," said Steve Cockburn, Amnesty International's deputy regional director for West and Central Africa. "The gap between the number of peacekeepers promised and the number deployed must be urgently filled. Only once the full force is on the ground, undertaking patrols and protecting CAR's civilian population, can the UN properly fulfill its protection mandate."

Claude Cafardy, Deputy Head of Mission in the CAR for Doctors Without Borders, sounded more pessimistic.

"It seems that forces will look different. But right now, we are not confident [in] their efficiency in the coming months in CAR," Cafardy said.

Since achieving independence in 1960, about 10 peacekeeping missions have been deployed in CAR and so far have failed to bring a lasting stability in the country.