

Christians Looted as Rebels Take Over Central African Republic

A three-month-old rebel uprising in the Central African Republic swept into the country's capital Sunday, ousting the president and leaving ransacked Christian homes and churches in its wake.

A source close to the Episcopal Conference of the Central African Republic told World Watch Monitor that many Christians' properties have been looted. Cars, electronics and other goods were stolen.

The main Cathedral of Bangui, the premises of Caritas Charity, and the houses of a number of religious communities were targeted by armed men, said the source, who is a Catholic priest and asked not to be publicly identified, for security reasons.

Several rebel groups unhappy with the government of President Francois Bozizé, joined forces in December under the banner Séléka and within weeks had taken control of much of the country's north, northeast and the central regions.

Landlocked and largely impoverished, the French-speaking Central African Republic has a long history of unstable, military governments since it gained independence in 1960. Bozizé, who rose to power in a coup 10 years ago, fled Sunday to neighbouring Cameroon.

The rebellion swept out of the north, where the country's Muslim minority is concentrated, giving it a militant Islamic character, experts said.

"Given the rebellion's origins in the north, we can assume there are many Muslims in their ranks" said Roland Marchal, a sub-Saharan researcher at France's National Centre for Scientific Research, in published news accounts.

Looting is being reported across the capital, Bangui.

"We live in a great fear," the Catholic priest said. "Séléka's leaders must take measures to protect our premises. Right now, properties belonging to Muslims in our neighbourhood are not attacked."

It is difficult to evaluate the extent of the looting, he said, because communication systems are down and many residents have restricted their movements. Water and power supplies have been suspended, plunging the capital into darkness.

Local sources said the main detention centre in Bangui was attacked and its occupants are on the loose, adding to the climate of fear. A curfew has been imposed.

Victims say that since Séléka militants overran Gambo and Bangassou in the southeast on March 11, they have increasingly targeted the Christian population.

Msgr. Juan José Aguirre Muños, Bishop of Bangassou, said rebels stole a dozen mission cars, and destroyed a number of church buildings when they entered the town.

In a letter sent to World Watch Monitor, Muños said Séléka forces robbed and destroyed the rector's house of the diocesan minor seminary, the carpenter's shop, the internet centre, the Catholic college, the pharmacy, and a new surgery block, among other facilities.

The mission mechanic, Jean Marie, was severely beaten, Muños said, because he would not reveal where some automobiles were hidden.

Rebels also targeted government buildings such as the Bangassou town hall. Muños said they threw patients to the floor to steal their mattresses.

Meanwhile, he said, “they respected only mosques and Muslim traders, to whom they gave our goods to sell.”

In town of Ndele, Pastor Jean Bosco Ndakouzou said rebels looted his house and likely would have killed him had he been home at the time.

Elsewhere, in Bambari, rebels destroyed a Baptist church, burning church benches as firewood, local sources said.

Rev. Leo Tibenda, a priest in the Catholic Comboni order, told Catholic News Service the rebels initially gave assurances they would not target religious communities, but the uprising quickly took on Islamist overtones.

“They started victimizing local Christians, telling them their cattle, many given by the church via Caritas, now belonged to the state. Most wear turbans, which isn’t the custom here, and are much better armed than the government’s soldiers. Their presence is fuelling serious tension between local Christians and Muslims,” Tibenda told Catholic News Service.

“The general mood here is that the Muslim community has been in collusion with Séléka,” he is quoted as saying.

Since independence, the former French colony has faced numerous military coups and rebellions. Bozizé came to power in 2003 following a rebellion that deposed Ange-Félix Patassé. A number of peace deals signed over years have failed to bring

lasting stability. Despite its considerable natural resources—uranium, diamonds, gold, timber, cotton and coffee—the Central African Republic is one of Africa's poorest countries.

Adding to the climate of instability is the fact that most of the Central African Republic's neighbours – South Sudan, Chad, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo—likewise have experienced political crises, with rebellions still active in some of them.

The latest truce between rebels and the Bozizé government, signed in Libreville, Gabon, lasted less than three months. On March 21, the day after the expiration of an ultimatum of 72 hours given to Bozizé to comply with the terms of the truce, rebels resumed fighting.

The rapid advance of Séléka fighters has prompted several African countries, from as far away as South Africa, to intervene. Troops from Chad, Cameroon, Republic of Congo and Gabon were supposed to protect the capital Bangui from the advancing rebels.

The self-proclaimed new president of the Central African Republic, Michel Djotodia, has pledged to respect the Libreville peace deal, according to French media. He said he is willing to form a national unity government hold elections in three years.