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1. SECURITY

1.1 Continued fighting between government and rebel forces

The most important development on the security front over the past two weeks was the recapture of the city of Damara, 75 km from Bangui, which had been in rebel hands since the beginning of November when the rebels were forced to retreat from Bangui by government, Libyan and Congolese forces. The city was recaptured by a force made up of the same MLC rebel forces from the DRC, backed up by heavy Libyan bombardment. The government is consolidating its hold on Damara and on Bossembele captured earlier. In the meantime, rebels remain in control of the remaining Northern and Eastern cities they have been holding, including Sibut, 112 km to the North of Damara, the cities situated between Damara and Moyen Sido on the Chadian Border, and Bambari to the North East. Their most recent captured location is Paoua in the North West, situated 70 km from the Chadian border.

1.2 Role of the MLC troops of Jean Pierre Bemba in the DRC

Within the city of Bangui, shooting incidents involving the Presidential Guard and MLC forces and the civilian population have continued. On 12 December, prolonged shooting was reported in the 8th district of Bangui after the population erected barricades to prevent the government from installing MLC fighters in a school compound. As of 13 December, security forces had dismantled the barricades. The government has however strongly denied seeking to install MLC troops in school compounds in the capital. This nonetheless was another manifestation of deeply felt anti-MLC sentiment among the CAR civilian population following over seven weeks of harassment, humiliations and rape by these troops. The tension between the population and the MLC troops is evident and could spill over into open confrontation any moment with predictable results. In any case, attempts to find more infrastructure in Bangui to house the MLC troops, and the latter's lengthening reach (they are presently in Damara and apparently poised to move further North to Sibut) are clear proof that their presence in the Central African Republic is not about to end any time soon. Their presence is also reported on the Bangui-Bouar road (the main land access to the CAR from Cameroon) where they are reported to be harassing lorry drivers and other civilian travelers requesting money and seizing personal belongings and valuables. This presence and control in an ever increasing number of CAR cities, coupled with their notoriety in the area of human rights violations (rape, widespread looting, summary executions, etc) remain a major security threat and concern. Significantly, the role of these troops is not part of any security-related deal within the CAR, within CEMAC, between the CAR and its outside partners, within the UN, and even within the framework of the newly negotiated inter-Congolese accord signed in South Africa on 17 December 2002. The earlier this issue is confronted by the international community, the better it will be for the victimized civilian population of the Central African Republic, and the signature of the inter-Congolese Agreement is a unique opportunity for the new DRC government and the international community that helped broker the peace to hold Mr. Bemba to account.

1.3 The CEMAC Initiative

The CEMAC troops have started to arrive. The Gabonese contingent (some 227 soldiers and officers) arrived one week ago, and the Cameroonian, Equatorial Guinea, and Congolese contingents are still awaited. While their installation is said to be proceeding normally, they are yet to be operational on the ground. The government has expressed its concern over the slow pace of the CEMAC process, and has made it clear that the Libyan troops will not leave until the CEMAC force is fully operational. For the time-being, Libyan military presence (including heavy armament and other logistical support) has been reported in Gbadolite and Zongo, two towns in Northern DRC in the territory controlled by Jean Pierre Bemba, whose troops have been fighting the CAR rebels in support of President Patassé. Although the Libyans have publicly denied such presence in the DRC, this has prompted discussions locally regarding the significance of the planned Libyan withdrawal from Bangui if and when this actually happens. The Libyan military presence in MLC-controlled territory in the DRC, given the increased coordination of Libyan and MLC military activity in the CAR (with MLC providing ground troops and Libya providing vital air cover) would clearly point to an even closer alliance between Libya and Jean-Pierre Bemba in support of President Patassé.

2. POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

The past two weeks have seen increased activity among CAR political actors on the issue of finding a peaceful resolution of the current crisis. Political groupings have issued statements calling for measures to be taken, ranging from dialogue between the government and all segments of society (including the armed rebellion), to uprising by the population and forces of law and order to force the departure of the Patassé regime.

2.1 Conference of Political Parties and Parliamentarians

The Conference of Political Parties and Parliamentarians met on 09 and 10 in Bangui under the auspices of the UN Mission in CAR, BONUCA, and, among other things, called for a number of immediate measures including a cease-fire, the departure of foreign troops to create space for the CEMAC forces, and the examination of measures to be taken to facilitate national reconciliation. The conference also called for an early decision on the dates of the Round Table, and on the selection of a Mediator to lead the process.

2.2 General strike by the "Concertation des Partis Politiques de l'Opposition"

This group of 13 political parties, some six of which have seats in the National Assembly, refused the invitation to participate in the Conference of Political Parties and Parliamentarians. Instead, they have called for a stay-at-home general strike on 17 December 2002 in memory of the victims of summary executions, rape and other forms of humiliation suffered at the hands of the Libyan army (notably aerial bombardments) and the MLC troops of Jean Pierre Bemba.

2.3 Creation of a civilian-military anti-Patassé Front

The most significant development in the political arena however has been the coming together of the current armed rebellion led by General Bozizé, and some prominent political leaders including a former Prime Minister and some Parliamentarians. They issued a joint declaration on 07 December condemning Libyan and MLC intervention in the CAR, rejecting President Patassé's call for dialogue, calling on the police and armed forces to join the rebellion, and for the creation of an interim administration.

2.4 The Government's position on calls for all-inclusive dialogue

The Government's response so far has been to brand the Opposition coalition and others who share their view as criminals seeking to destabilize the country and its constitution, and promising to take legal action against them for subversion. In effect, the government continues to view the present crisis in purely legalistic terms, and in a speech to Mayors and Quarter Heads in the Bangui area on 16 December, President Patassé promised to bring to justice on subversion charges all those who had signed the Declaration of the civilian-military coalition referred to above as well as local Opposition members seen to support the civilian-military front. In the meantime, and following the recapture of Damara, there are several indications that the government feels more confident to continue its strategy of complete recapture of all rebel-occupied towns. This of course makes the negotiation of humanitarian access with both parties (government and rebels) extremely difficult. Since no dialogue can be effective without the government freeing up the occupied parts of the country, or negotiating with the armed rebellion occupying those areas, the present entrenched positions between the government and the now-broader rebellion show that little progress is being made so far towards a genuine national political dialogue. The terms of reference of the National Roundtable proposed by President Patassé remain to be formulated and agreed upon in terms of content, process, and participants, and no dates have as yet been proposed. For its part,

2.5 Union Activities

In addition to the ongoing teachers' strike, the six main Workers' Unions (FNTSS, FESYTPLAT, FSTC, FESYMAEEF, FENSYFOP and FESYNAPOC) have served notice to the government for a 3-day strike following fruitless talks held with the government on 10 and 12 December 2002 on their demand for the immediate payment of 9 months of salary arrears. This strike will take place from 18 to 20 December, starting the day after a successful Opposition-led general strike organized on 17 December. The Unions have further informed the government that following the three-day strike they will organize other strikes and "activities" if their demands for salary payments are still not met. In this same vein, the Health Workers Union will be meeting on 18 December to select dates for a planned 48-hour strike involving all health workers to press their own claims for the payment of salary arrears.

It thus appears clear that the Unions have now decided to resume their activities following a six-week lull while the conflict raged between the government and the insurgents. Without any prospect of early budgetary support from the Bretton Woods Institutions, it is immediately unclear as to how the government will be able to meet the ever-increasing demands of the Unions. If the significant success of the Opposition general strike on 17 December 2002 is an indicator, it is clear that the social context is ripe for all such activities to benefit from the support of the population, most of which has been deprived of basic social services for a long time. It is further proof of the fact that the CAR's social problems are becoming more and more urgent, and that they will most definitely complicate the present armed conflict if steps are not taken soon by the government and by the international community to give the country's social crisis the same priority at the ongoing armed conflict presently gets, if not more.

3. HUMANITARIAN OUTLOOK

3.1 Humanitarian access

Despite initial success by the ICRC in reaching beyond rebel lines and freeing a Presidential spokesman, access to populations in need of humanitarian support remains problematical. Access to civilian population outside of Bangui has not improved in any significant way since the last Update (27 November 2002). Since the last report, the government has recaptured the city of Damara some 75 km from Bangui, thanks to MLC and Libyan troops, thus opening up the road to this city. Initial visits to the city by humanitarian agencies have revealed a town virtually abandoned by its inhabitants, and systematically looted by MLC troops. Latest attempts by humanitarian agencies to move beyond Damara have met with opposition from the MLC troops which have informed the agencies that they take no orders from the CAR government, and that only a direct instruction from President Patassé, or from MLC authorities will be heeded. These agencies are presently planning to request a meeting with the President to discuss access beyond the government-held cities. The present difficulties encountered with the MLC troops is further proof of the fact that the recapture of rebel-held cities does not imply immediate access and humanitarian support to the population. In effect, given the unsavory reputation of the MLC troops, their full control of any city in the country is rather a deterrent for the supply of any humanitarian assistance in the form of food and medicines as any such supplies are almost certain to be immediately looted by the troops, especially since most of the population, even including the wounded, in the recaptured cities tends to stay away from their homes in fear of harassment.

In a noteworthy change of approach, the government has started admitting publicly that cities are held by the rebels. The Prime Minister has given his approval in principle (although as yet unwritten) to the UN System to seek access directly from the rebels to towns under the latter's control in order to conduct humanitarian assessments and provide support to the population where necessary. The recent experience with MSF and the Congolese MLC troops does not quite conform to the Prime Minister's promise. Nevertheless, the UN System is moving forward with its dialogue with the rebels and is presently negotiating a mission to the Northern cities under rebel control. Once the details are finalized, these proposals will be submitted the government in order to undertake an early humanitarian assessment mission to selected rebel-held cities. Such access is urgently expected in light of some of the information filtering in to the agencies in Bangui on the humanitarian situation in the rebel-held areas.

3.2 Health

Due to lack of access to rebel-held areas, including especially those to the East and North of the country, information on the health situation outside of Bangui remains difficult to obtain. The immediate casualty of this lack of access remains the joint vaccination programme, which has now been entirely jeopardised. After promising access over a number of weeks, the

government has finally acted to recognize its inability in the immediate future to ensure such access and has publicly admitted the possibility of the national vaccination programme being postponed to next year. Its proposal to re-programme the joint vaccination days to January is still not based on any realistic estimates of the timing of access to rebel-held areas, especially considering the fact that such estimates are based exclusively on its present strategy of recapturing all rebel-held areas in time for the programme to be launched. It should be noted that the necessary logistics linked to the programme cannot even be planned at this stage given the lack of safe access to most of the country.

The most urgent problem to be resolved regarding the health sector remains the re-supply of essential supplies to the 4th and 5th health zones which have been completely cut off from Bangui, the main source of such supplies, since the 25th of October 2002. The immediate impact of the conflict on the health structures in these zones has been disastrous. The Regional Supply Centre for Essential Medicines (CRAME) in Bossangoa was completely looted and destroyed during fighting in the town. Even in those areas where pharmaceutical depots were spared, the lack of fuel for cold storage has led to the destruction of virtually all vaccine stocks in these zones, at the same time as humanitarian agencies are requesting vaccines from donor partners for their day-to-day support to the population. Presently, the Humanitarian Health group is working with officials of the Ministry of Health to determine those parts of the country where urgent assessments are needed in both government- and rebel-held areas. In the meantime, humanitarian agencies are negotiating on a one-on-one basis with missionary authorities in some of the occupied towns in order to convey vital medical supplies. Over the past two weeks, UNICEF has been able to send medical supplies through Catholic Mission flights to Bambari, Mobaye, Bangassou, and Obo. The situation in Damara, the latest town to be recaptured by the government, is proof that the health situation in all recaptured areas will need to be addressed as a matter of urgency. In effect, along the whole 75 km stretch of road from Bangui to Damara, none of the Health Centres and Posts are operational. For fear of being harassed and looted, all medical personnel have fled not only the Health centers but their homes as well. Humanitarian agencies visiting Damara have heard eye-witness accounts of MLC troops chasing the civilian population into the hills to strip them of what little possessions they have taken with them in their flight. Within Damara itself, there are no doctors, and up to 40 km from Bangui, there is virtually no civilian population in areas that were inhabited prior to the arrival of the MLC troops. To make up for the gaps created by the absence of national staff, MSF-Spain has continued their work along the Bangui-Damara road up to PK 22, and has consulted over 4,000 patients so far. MSF-Spain is however scaling down its activities in the PK-12 area as health workers slowly return to work following the departure of MLC troops from the area as they move further into the provinces. Their activities are however continuing in PK-22, and a mobile clinic will be set up Damara to make up for the cessation of health support services in the town. In Bangui, the National Red Cross, thanks to the support of the ICRC, is pursuing its programme of exhuming and re-burying corpses that constitute a threat to public health, and has started the disinfection of wells situated in areas where the exhumation and reburial is being undertaken.

3.3 Food security

Despite shortages in some basic food items, the sharp rise in food prices that characterized the early days of the conflict in October 2002 has been reversed. Food prices in Bangui have tended to drop, not so much as a result of increased supply, but as a result of the fall in purchasing power among the vast majority of the population, and due to the perishable nature of some of the food items involved. The price index published by the Statistics Division of the Ministry of Economic Affairs, confirms the inflationist trend in November 2002 caused by the armed conflict. Despite the drop in prices for food items in general, six weeks into the conflict the a number of vital food items have stabilized at an extremely high level in relation to the purchasing power of the bulk of the population. These include beef, groundnuts, onions, tomatoes and oranges, whose prices have stabilized at between 100 and 150% of their pre-conflict levels. On the other hand the prices of cassava leaves, papaya, and plantain, have dropped by between 40 and 50% of their pre-conflict levels, reflecting the continued slide in purchasing power of the population resulting in part from the non-payment or irregular payment of salaries. Information collected from other cities in the country indicates continued shortages of some basic food items such as palm oil (Bambari), onion, salt, sugar, etc. Other shortages are directly due to the widespread looting that has characterised the conflict, affecting agricultural products and cattle. FAO and WFP have expressed grave concern over this situation that will most certainly result in severe malnutrition in the areas affected. WFP stands ready to undertake food needs assessments once the security conditions permit. Such assessments are already planned along the Damara road together with the ICRC. While waiting for the assessment of food needs for the civilian population in rebel-held areas, WFP has continued implementation of its non-emergency food aid programme in the provinces, including especially Ombella-Mpoko, Lobaye and some areas of Bangui. It is also providing food aid support to some vulnerable groups, including some of the women presently being monitored by the UNDP project designed to provide support to victims of rape and other forms of violence. Presently, 30 such rape victims, specially identified because of the special approach needed to take account of their cultural/religious (Moslem) background, are receiving WFP food aid as part of the socio-psychological support they are currently receiving from the project team.

4. HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

Reports have also been coming in about human rights violations, notably looting and summary executions perpetrated by rebels in some areas under their control. The Bishop of Bossangoa denounced such human rights violations by rebels in the town, including the assassination of at least one Catholic Priest in the mission after it had been captured. In other rebel-held cities, looting and destruction of public buildings have been reported. Apart from Bossangoa where these exactions are known to have involved random killing of civilians, rebel looting is known to have mostly targeted businesses in search of money, fuel and logistical support.

For their part, the MLC troops of rebel leader, Jean Pierre Bemba, have systematically targeted, and continue to target the civilian population everywhere they have been, namely, Bangui, Bossembele, and now Damara. They are now poised to lead the government offensive on Sibut and other Eastern and Northern towns, and if their reputation so far is anything to go by, then the same systematic violations of human rights can be expected.

4.1 Support to Rape Victims

So far, the UNDP project has identified 248 women and girls that fell victim to rape and other forms of physical violence and humiliations in the hands of the MLC troops. 75 of them are currently being monitored for post-traumatic stress; 42 are

receiving medical attention through gynecological tests (PV, BW) and voluntary HIV/AIDS testing. Tests have revealed at least one pregnancy that can be traced back to the rape incident. 35 of the victims had been gang-raped at gun-point. The psychological support component of the project will be strengthened in the next few days with the planned arrival of an international UNICEF Psychologist who will strengthen the team of experts currently on the project.

As part of its activities to support the victims of rape, the UNDP project is working closely with the Central African Human Rights League and with the UN Mission (BONUCA) to build cases for the victims in preparation for eventual trials. UNICEF and UNDP have further expressed their willingness to strengthen the social (material) support component which will be required to ease the psychological burden on the victims, especially for those who suffered both rape and looting.

5. INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS

Following the repatriation by UNHCR during the week of 09 December of the last 443 Congolese IDPs from the DRC Embassy, no new IDPs have sought refuge at the Embassy. However, there are reports from the DRC of more Central Africans seeking refuge in the DRC village of Gele across the river from CAR. More details are being sought from the refugees regarding their numbers and the reasons for their escape. It is thought that they could be fleeing from rebel troops chased out of Damara following the government offensive. UNHCR DRC is seeking further clarifications in this regard.

6. DEMINING AND MONITORING OF UXOs

An update from HALO Trust Expert will be included in future reports.

7. CONTINGENCY PLANNING

The UN agencies, NGOs, National Institutions dealing with humanitarian issues have created three sectoral working groups to reflect on the humanitarian situation and needs in the CAR for the medium term. For now, the substantive sectors covered are Health, Education and Agriculture, with humanitarian access and human rights as cross-cutting themes. In the immediate future, these groups will focus on assessing the impact of the relapsing crisis in the CAR on the population through in-depth analyses of these three sectors, and will proceed, with all involved, to identify immediate and medium term measures that can be taken despite the lull on the macro-economic reform front. TORs are presently being formulated to request OCHA and/or UNDP-BCPR technical support starting from January 2003. Depending on the success achieved in negotiating humanitarian access with all parties involved, OCHA and/or UNDP-BCPR Coordination support should help the Agencies work towards the formulation of emergency support activities, and possibly towards the institution of a Consolidated Appeal process. This could possibly be done in conjunction with a genuine, credible and inclusive political dialogue process, especially if there is increased political will on the part of all concerned in the CAR to work towards such a process.

Note: Next Update will be end of January 2003. Future updates will be on a monthly basis barring significant happenings affecting the political, security and/or humanitarian situation.

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