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Ending Impunity to Prevent the Renewed Threat of Ethnic Cleansing in the Central African Republic

This month, the United States imposed targeted [sanctions](#) against two militia commanders in the Central African Republic (CAR), Abdoulaye Hissène and Maxime Mokom, providing a glimmer of hope for the fight against impunity in the country. The two men are accused of being part of an alliance between two armed factions (one faction from the ex-Séléka coalition and the other from the Anti-Balaka movement), and are [suspected](#) of coordinating acts of violence, and attempting *coups d'état*. The sanctions come at an appropriate time as the conflict in CAR continues to spread and intensify and the country “[gets locked in a spiral of violence not seen since the worst moment of the 2014 crisis](#)”.

The unilateral nature of United States’ decision, however, reveals dissent among members of the U.N. Security Council. To help end cycles of deadly violence in CAR, the Security Council, the European Union, and in particular France, must continue to strengthen their efforts to combat impunity and implement similar sanctions.

More than four years since the CAR crisis broke out, the country appears to be inexorably sinking into a state of permanent war. The sequence of events initially desired by the international community – Peace Agreement–Disarmament–Elections -- has not only [derailed](#) but has failed in building a lasting solution to the crisis. The security situation is now on the brink of implosion and impunity is endemic. In 2016, CAR was [ranked](#) 188th, in last position, on the Human Development Index. And while human misery is at its peak and [sectarian violence](#) is at an alarming level, the alliance between militia and political leaders is flourishing and undermining hope that a better future is still possible.

The persistent threat from armed group leaders as they seek to seize power means that the possibility of *coups d'état* is now systemic. In this climate of political survival, tribalism and economic predation cohabit and perpetuate instability. This system is no secret to Hissène. As a former diamond collector, he joined the armed struggle in 2007 and started to take control of mining sites in eastern CAR. In the current crisis, economic predation remains a central element of the strategies of armed groups, as illustrated by the violent [clashes](#) for control of gold and diamond sites in central CAR. In addition, in 2014, Hissène concluded an illicit [deal](#) worth \$9.9 million for 300 kg of gold with an Indian investor. In a country where a grenade [costs](#) between \$0.50-1.00, these exorbitant sums of money fuel the flow of arms and ammunition that are then used against civilians.

Like other warlords in CAR, Hissène has been manipulating civilians, particularly Muslim youth, to serve his political and financial interests. However, he justifies his armed struggle by calling it a fight against socio-economic inequalities and the marginalization of Muslims. In 2016, credible sources close to Hissène said, on the condition of anonymity, that he had declared himself to be a “defender of the supreme interests of Muslims” and that the current context justified “being armed and keeping arms.” He was referring to the threat from the Anti-Balaka on the Muslim community.

Despite this, by the end of 2015, the two men’s armed factions (Hissène's FPRC and Mokom's Anti-Balaka wing, supported by former President François Bozizé) were at the center of a sordid plot. Both men’s factions fueled sectarian tensions in order to overthrow transitional authorities. According to credible sources, this coalition planned the [killing](#) of a 17-year old Muslim boy. His throat was cut, his body moved to a Christian neighborhood to make it appear like the murder was orchestrated by Anti-Balaka militias. Following this incident, Hissène’s group distributed weapons, ammunition, petrol, and military uniforms to young Muslims. Hissène made hate-filled speeches against Christians and encouraged young Muslims to attack Christian neighborhoods. On the day he gave his speech, at least 31 innocent civilians were either stabbed to death or [killed](#) by shots fired at point-blank range. Hundreds of people were injured and homes were burned. Human Rights Watch [noted](#) that “the vast majority of these killings were committed by members of armed Muslim self-defense groups” and added that “members of armed groups in the mostly Christian and animist anti-Balaka group also incited and participated in the violence, sometimes fighting against Muslim groups.”

Despite the issuance of an arrest warrant against Hissène in June 2016, he was able to flee the capital, Bangui, last August as part of a [violent exodus](#) of ex-Séléka militias from the city. As confirmed by a confidential U.N. report, Hissène now coordinates the armed struggle in central CAR against the Union pour la Paix en Centrafrique (UPC), an armed group mainly composed of Fulani Peuhls led by Ali Darassa. The UPC established its headquarters in Bambari in 2013 and controlled most of the mining sites in Nzako, Ndassima, and Bakouma. Since November 2016, the FPRC has been hunting members of the UPC with the aim of regaining control of Bambari as well as the mining sites, in close collaboration with the Anti-Balaka faction led by Mokom.

In the end, [civilians](#) bear the brunt of these violent clashes. Dozens of civilians are killed and injured on a daily basis and thousands of people are forced to flee the violence. Ethnic and religious divisions continue to be fueled and manipulated. These divisions have now taken the form of a [deadly campaign](#) against Fulani Peuhl communities, considered to be supporters of the UPC. If this sectarian violence continues, the threat of ethnic cleansing in CAR may again become reality.

In CAR, war is creating new victims every day. Several years have passed but war crimes, crimes against humanity, and economic crimes continue to be perpetrated, despite the presence of a U.N. stabilization [force](#) of 12,870 personnel, including 10,750 soldiers. Those perpetrating these crimes, however, enjoy almost complete impunity and freedom of movement.

To end this brutal war, members of the Security Council, including France, and the European Union, must pay close attention to the seriousness of this conflict and adopt strong measures, including convictions targeted sanctions against those responsible for these atrocities.

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