

Seleka rebels seize capital of Central African Republic

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On March 23-24, Seleka, a coalition of rebel groups in Central African Republic (CAR), seized control of the capital city, Bangui, after a series of offensives that began last December.

Seleka issued the following statement upon seizing the city: "Central African Republic has just opened a new page in its history...The political committee of the Seleka coalition, made up of Central Africans of all kinds, calls on the population to remain calm and to prepare to welcome the revolutionary forces of Seleka." The rebels' decision to seize Bangui comes amid French efforts to bring about a political realignment in the country.

Pillaging has been reported in Bangui, and basic services, water and electricity, are not functioning.

Eric Massi, a European representative for Seleka, said the alliance plans to hold elections in three years, once the situation has stabilized. "Our goal is not to set a strict deadline but to establish a roadmap that respects the spirit of the agreements signed in Libreville, to return to democracy," Massi claimed.

Thierry Vircoulon, project director for central Africa at International Crisis Group expressed skepticism about the capacity of Seleka to govern the country: "This clearly demonstrates where the real power is within Seleka: The military commanders dominate the political leadership," he says. "This is a source of concern as the Seleka does not seem to have a political program or even the first page of a political program."

President Francois Boize—who came to power through a military coup in March of 2003 with the assistance of the army of neighboring Chad, and then won presidential elections in 2005 and 2011—has fled to Cameroon.

Seleka has nominated a new president, Michel Djotodia, to take his place. Rebel fighters moved into

Bangui on Saturday, and have since clashed with CAR and South African forces. At least 13 South African forces have been killed in the fighting, and 27 more were wounded. The South African military responded with a statement that South African forces will remain in Central African Republic.

Over the past several months, the Seleka offensive has forced almost 200,000 refugees from their homes, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. The *Los Angeles Times* wrote on Monday that there have been numerous human rights abuses since the Seleka takeover, including rapes and killings. Two Indian citizens were killed and 6 more wounded in clashes at the Bangui airport over the weekend.

The social dislocation caused by the fighting is particularly devastating for countries like the CAR, which—along with Mali, another recent target of French military aggression—is one of the poorest countries in the world. The CAR placed 178th out of 179 in the United Nations human development index (HDI), which measures length and quality of life, access to knowledge, and standard of living.

Life expectancy in CAR is 48 years, and the average resident receives 3.5 years of education. Two-thirds of CAR's inhabitants live below the official poverty line, on less than \$1.25 per day.

Boris Varnitzky, director of the International Rescue Committee efforts in CAR, said: "The myriad threats to people's lives and safety, and the lack of the most basic services, have created a grave humanitarian crisis in the Central African Republic that requires immediate attention and long-term aid. When you look at this country's basic social and economic indicators, you quickly realize that the people here are actually in many cases worse off than people living in better known

crisis areas such as Darfur and eastern Congo.”

Paris and Washington have backed the rebel takeover, though Paris had previously supported peace talks between the rebels and the government beginning in January.

US State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland called on the Seleka leadership “to establish law and order in the city and restore basic services” in Bangui. She urged Seleka to engage with leaders from Chad and Congo to forge a political solution.

Starting in December of 2012, French President François Hollande refused to deploy the over 250 French troops stationed in Bangui’s airport to defend the regime against the rebels, cynically claiming the troops are there “in no way to intervene in internal affairs.”

In fact, it was a marked shift from France’s policy in 2006 and 2007, when it repeatedly intervened against rebel forces to defend the regime, including with air strikes on rebel forces.

Effectively, Paris has for now thrown its weight behind the Seleka rebels. Hollande has urged Seleka to “remain calm” and form a “national unity government.” France has deployed an additional 100 troops to Gabon and 200 more to join the 250 already stationed in CAR.

The sudden shift by the imperialist powers to back Seleka’s seizure of power comes amid an escalating neo-colonial intervention throughout the region. French and Chadian troops are fighting in northern Mali, with assistance from Washington—which has deployed US Reaper drones in support of the French invasion. A new drone base and 100 US troops have deployed to Niger, with hundreds more to follow. Chadian Special Forces, trained by the US Green Berets, operate throughout the region.

By backing Bozizé’s ouster, the United States and France are seeking to advance their interests against the influence of China. US diplomatic cables published by WikiLeaks noted with concern China’s growing strategic presence in CAR. One cable, entitled “Growing Chinese influence in CAR evident,” worried that 40 military officers from the CAR were receiving training in China, as compared to only two or three in the US.

CAR is rich in gold, diamonds, uranium, and timber, and its passing under Chinese influence is unacceptable

to US imperialism. The same cable pointed to the imperialist interests behind the French and American intervention: “With French investments moribund and French influence in general decline, the Chinese are likely positioning themselves as the CAR’s primary benefactor in exchange for access to the CAR’s ample deposits of uranium, gold, iron, diamonds, and possibly oil.”

The cable warned that Bozizé “is welcoming this relationship as an alternative to more restrictive relations with the French and the West” and would “increasingly embrace the Chinese as an alternative to the French and other Western benefactors.”



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