Executive Summary

Book Series ■ December 2008

The Central African Republic and Small Arms: A Regional Tinderbox

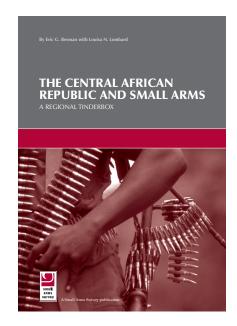**By Eric G. Berman** ■ eric.berman@smallarmssurvey.org
With Louisa N. Lombard ■ louisa.lombard@gmail.com

Between 1997 and 2006, the Central African Republic (CAR) hosted four international peacekeeping operations and witnessed conflicts in neighbouring states that have routinely made international headlines. Yet relatively little literature exists on the country. This study has relevance far beyond the troubled, landlocked nation that is its subject. It challenges many widely held assumptions about security sector reform (SSR) that have continental and global implications. The study also provides a richer context for acquiring a better understanding of continuing threats to peace and security throughout the region. It underscores how conflicts are interrelated and how progress in one country can harm other countries if proper attention is not paid.

CAR—a country spanning 623,000 square km (somewhat larger than Portugal and Spain combined)—has fared poorly and experienced considerable turmoil since gaining independence from France in 1960. Its 3.9 million citizens are among the poorest people in the world. There have been four coups d'état (and many more attempted coups), the latest on 15 March 2003, when former military Chief of Staff Gen. François Bozizé overthrew elected President Ange-Félix Patassé.

Despite these upheavals, the proliferation and use of small arms did not play a prominent role in the country's misfortune until 1982. It was then, after a failed coup attempt, that non-state actors in CAR began to take receipt of arms from abroad. The change in government in Chad in 1982 also had serious ramifications for CAR, including the movement of armed personnel across the border. The 1980s and early 1990s witnessed a number of coup attempts, suspected coup attempts, and relatively small-scale violence involving dissatisfied factions and the Forces armées centrafricaines (Central African Armed Forces, FACA) (Kalck, 1992, pp. xliv–lv).
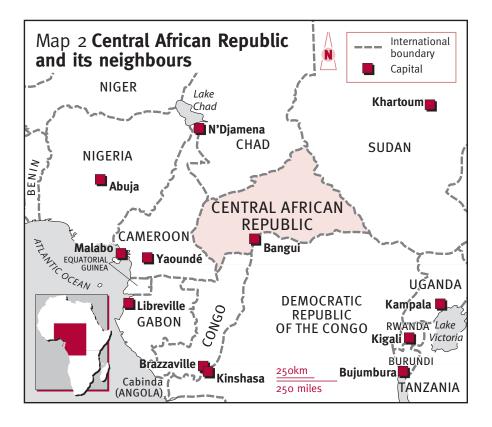
The situation deteriorated sharply after 1995. In 1996 elements of the FACA mutinied, resulting in the looting of the arms depot at the Kassaï barracks in the capital, Bangui. The following year many more thousands of weapons flooded CAR when Zairian President Mobutu Sese Seko was overthrown. More weapons entered CAR two years later when the Ugandan-supported rebel group the Mouvement de libération du Congo (Movement for the Liberation of the Congo, MLC) of Jean-Pierre Bemba defeated the Forces armées congolaises (Congolese Armed Forces, FAC) of Mobuto's successor Laurent-Désiré Kabila, in the north of the DRC, along its border with CAR. Chad introduced more weapons still into CAR by supporting former FACA Chief of Staff François Bozizé in his 17-month struggle against Central African President Ange-Félix Patassé. Bozizé succeeded in overthrowing Patassé in March 2003.

This book comprises four parts. The first examines small arms availability and distribution with respect to state and non-state actors in CAR. The second looks at small arms flows and trafficking, both direct transfers from states and indirect transfers from states and armed groups. The third assesses the impacts of small arms use and availability. The fourth analyses the various disarmament efforts undertaken in CAR in recent years. An Epilogue (by Louisa N. Lombard) covers events through the beginning of 2007.

Below are the main findings.

■ Armed elements in CAR seriously outgun government forces (with the exception of the presidential

Map 2 Central African Republic and its neighbours

International boundary
Capital

NIGER

Lake Chad

N'Djamena
CHAD

NIGERIA

Abuja

BENIN

CAMEROON

Malabo
EQUATORIAL GUINEA

Yaoundé

ATLANTIC OCEAN

Libreville
GABON

CONGO

Brazzaville
Kinshasa

Cabinda (ANGOLA)

Khartoum

SUDAN

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

Bangui

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

UGANDA

Kampala

RWANDA

Kigali

Lake Victoria

BURUNDI

Bujumbura

TANZANIA

250km
250 miles

- Arms recovery programmes in CAR have been poorly designed and badly implemented. In addition, they have been considerably less successful than touted, and arguably have undermined national security.
- The safari hunting industry can play a positive role in countering the deleterious socioeconomic effects of poaching.
- While small arms proliferation has historically not been a problem in CAR, it continues to increase.

CAR today is a tinderbox for both the country and the region. Within the country, armed men commit frequent acts of banditry. The continuing conflicts in Darfur and Chad provide additional sources of arms and demand for additional weaponry.

It is hoped that the study's findings will aid policymakers in devising new security sector reform and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programmes—both in CAR and elsewhere. For the challenges that the Central African Republic faces—a weak central government, regional conflicts, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, to name but a few—are not unique to CAR. ◪

---

guard), which are not prepared to counter them.

- The government, which in October 2003 claimed that around 50,000 small arms were circulating nationally beyond its control, may have been *underestimating* the scale of the problem.
- Long-standing arms stockpile multipliers for the Central African Armed Forces are extremely small. Consequently, past calculations of government small arms holdings throughout Africa may be well below present estimates.
- Galil and M-16 assault rifles are not in broad use due to the scarcity of 5.56 mm ammunition they require.
- Peacekeeping operations have not been a significant source of weapons.
- While regional states have supplied weapons to government forces and to rebels seeking to acquire power, the type of hardware has been relatively limited and has not included surface-to-air missiles.
- Non-state actors not only receive *matériel* and other kinds of support *from* governments, but they can

also play a crucial role in providing military aid *to* governments.

- While rates of firearms-related deaths and injuries in CAR may be lower than in other conflict zones in the region, the country suffers greatly from the economic and psychological effects of small arms use and availability.

Map 4 Indirect transfers of small arms into CAR from regional armies and armed groups

CHAD

FAT & Codos
1982–84

SUDAN

CAMEROON

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

Kaga Bandoro

FANT May 1999

MLC 2001–03

Bangui

Mbaïki

Bimbo

FANT

Mobaye

Bangassou

Obo

SPLA
1980s–1990s

Uele

FAZ
1997

FAR & Interahamwe
1994

FAC
1999

Congo

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

RWANDA

Flow of arms
FAC Army or armed group
1999 Dates of transfer
International boundary
Capital

200km
200 miles