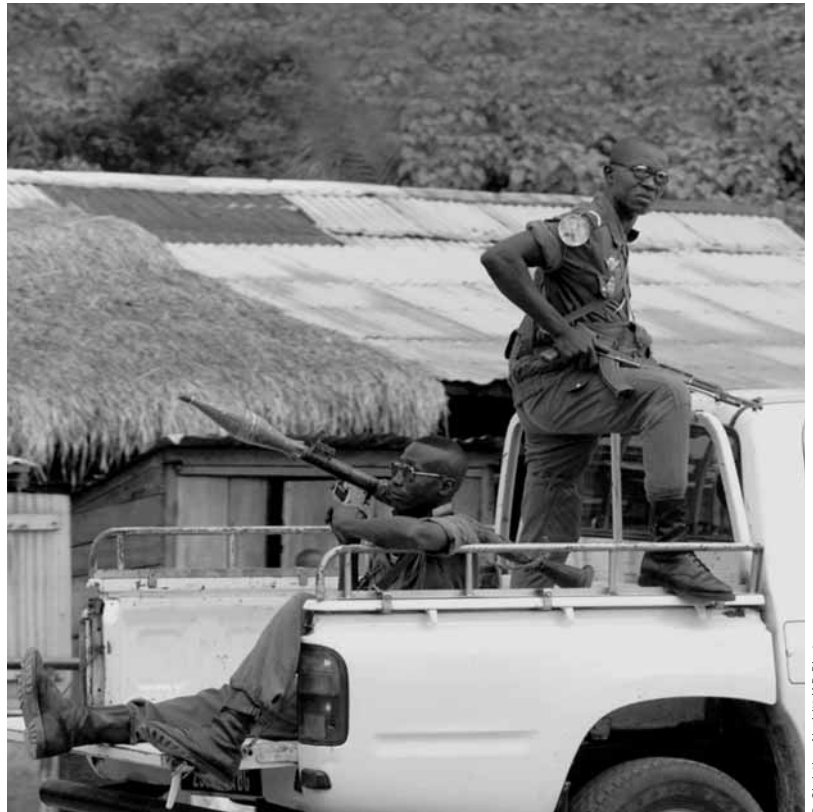


The Central African Republic: A CASE STUDY OF SMALL ARMS AND CONFLICT

In the past ten years, the Central African Republic (CAR) has 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 inter-related and how progress in one country can harm that of another if proper attention is not paid.

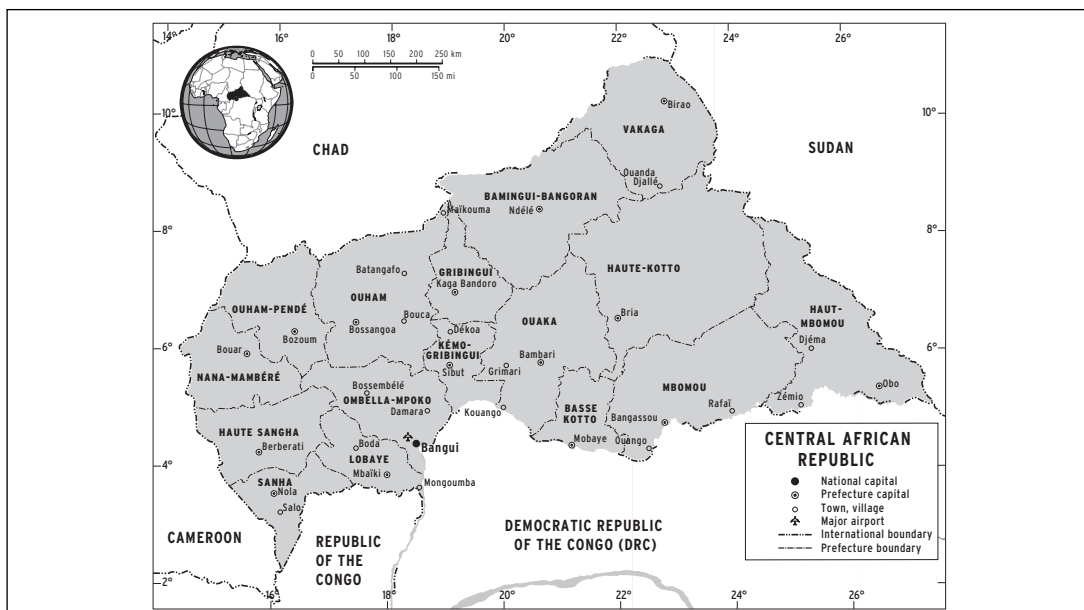
CAR—a country spanning 623,000 square kilometres (somewhat larger than Portugal and Spain combined)—has fared poorly and experienced considerable turmoil since gaining independence from France in 1960. Its 3.9 million citizens are among the poorest people in the world. There have been four coups d'état,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



CAR loyalist soldiers drive around Bangui in November 2002, shortly after President Ange-Félix Patassé squashed an uprising with the help of fighters called in from Libya and DRC.

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Map 11.1 Central African Republic and its neighbours



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Small arms did not figure prominently 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* (FACA). The situation deteriorated sharply in 1996, when elements of FACA mutinied, culminating in the looting of the country's largest arms depot at the Kassai barracks, in the capital, Bangui. In 1997, following the overthrow of Zairian President Mobutu Sese Seko, thousands of additional weapons flooded into CAR. A similar situation ensued two years later, when the Ugandan-backed *Mouvement de libération du Congo* (MLC), a rebel group led by Jean-Pierre Bemba, defeated the *Forces armées congolaises* (FAC) of Laurent Desiré Kabila, Mobutu's successor. During 2002 and 2003, more weapons still entered CAR via Chad, which backed General Bozizé's military campaign.

Arms recovery programmes in CAR have been poorly designed and badly implemented

This chapter focuses on events between the years 1996 and 2003 that have affected the state's ability to regulate weapons among civilians and have led to a massive influx of arms into large parts of the country. Together, they have created a clear threat to national security and to law and order. The chapter examines small arms availability and distribution in CAR; studies small arms flows and trafficking; assesses the impacts of small arms use and availability; and analyses the various disarmament efforts undertaken in CAR in recent years.

Below are the main findings.

- Armed elements in CAR seriously outgun government forces (with the exception of the presidential guard), which are not prepared to counter them.
- The government, which claims that 50,000 small arms are circulating nationally beyond its control, may be *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.
- 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 can also play a crucial role in aiding recognized state administrations.
- While firearms-related deaths and injuries in CAR may be relatively insignificant compared to other conflict zones in the region, the country suffers greatly from the economic and psychological effects of small arms use and availability.
- 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.

Today, the state's ability to regulate weapons among civilians is essentially non-existent. The massive influx of arms into large parts of the country represents a threat to national security and to law and order. Despite President Bozizé's political skills, the proliferation of small arms throughout CAR will further complicate an already challenging situation. CAR today is a tinderbox, but there is still hope that tensions can be defused. Developments that took shape in recent years have contributed to a lack of security in CAR. *Zaraguinas* (bandits) roam the roads with seeming impunity outside of the capital and armed robberies occur frequently in Bangui and elsewhere. Most disarmament efforts to date have been a waste of money, as evidenced by the recirculation rather than the removal of arms. In some ways, disarmament initiatives exacerbated tensions within the population, because the apparent selectivity with which schemes were implemented hardened differences between groups. Nevertheless, disarmament is still a hugely important endeavour worthy of international support; but the programme must be designed and implemented more competently. Future initiatives should target the numerous armed groups that Patassé created, Chadian *Zaraguinas*, and Bozizé's Liberators. The focus ought to be on collecting assault rifles and light weapons rather than antiquated bolt-action rifles. Weapons and ammunition collected should be destroyed.

CAR today is a tinderbox, but there is still hope that tensions can be defused.

The study's findings should aid policy-makers in devising new security-sector reform and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programmes, both in CAR and elsewhere.