



Political Solutions to Political Problems: UN Peacekeeping Operations and Dialogue-Based Protection of Civilians in Communal Conflicts

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Executive Summary

With UN peacekeepers increasingly deployed in areas experiencing local-level conflicts that do not involve state forces, responding to communal violence has become an acute challenge for missions. Such contexts require peace operations to adopt a dialogue-based approach to the protection of civilians (POC), focused specifically on local political solutions. In-depth analysis of the engagement of the UN mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) in the town of Batangafo demonstrates that missions can promote dialogue to address some of the underlying drivers of communal conflicts rather than treating violence as a symptom through military-focused interventions.

There are four main implications for contemporary peace operations as they seek to advance POC in contexts of communal conflict. First, the protection of civilians in these settings requires political solutions rather than solely relying on the actions of uniformed peacekeepers. By adapting peacekeeping efforts to support locally driven forms of conflict resolution, missions can address the deeper issues underlying conflict and create both a safer and a more stable environment for civilians.

Second, continuous and proactive dialogue helps to prevent conflict from escalating and makes local peace agreements more effective and sustainable. MINUSCA's permanent deployment of so-called SURGE teams in Batangafo, coupled with strong cooperation with local authorities, allowed the mission to shift from a reactive to a proactive approach to managing conflict.¹

Third, while the economic motives of armed groups often make local peace-making challenging, they can also be leveraged to incentivize these groups to commit to peace. This suggests that the pursuit of local political solutions requires a deep understanding of the political and economic context in which communal conflicts take place.

Finally, the implementation of POC mandates in communal conflict settings ultimately relies on alignment between local and national peace processes. Local agreements can be undermined by broader political disruptions, highlighting the need for an integrated approach to peacekeeping that connects national dynamics with local peace efforts.

These findings underscore the importance of embedding dialogue-based approaches within the operational planning cycles of missions like MINUSCA. In a world of constrained peacekeeping resources and rising geopolitical contestation, protection strategies will be more sustainable if missions adapt them to also focus on local political solutions.

¹ In UN peacekeeping, a SURGE team is a stand-by pool of peacekeeping staff (civilian, military, or police, depending on the mission's needs) who can be deployed quickly and temporarily when a mission faces sudden workload spikes, crises, or staffing gaps.

Introduction

Responding to violent communal conflicts has become a major challenge for the UN. Since 2000, nearly half of fatalities in conflicts where UN peacekeepers are deployed have occurred in local-level conflicts that do not involve state forces.² Given the high toll these conflicts take on civilians, missions need to address them to implement their protection of civilians (POC) mandates. Addressing these conflicts is also critical to broader efforts by UN peace operations to adapt to the evolving nature of armed conflict under increasingly constrained budgets.

As with other manifestations of organized armed violence, ending or reducing communal violence requires dialogue-based solutions. This issue brief focuses on how dialogue-based approaches to protecting civilians can address the complex dynamics of communal violence and their critical role in peacekeeping responses. Dialogue has the potential to tackle the issues underlying communal conflicts rather than merely treating violence as a symptom addressed through military-focused interventions.

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While the fact that communal violence is deeply political may seem self-evident, it is often overlooked in research and policymaking. There is a tendency to “romanticize” local peace processes as inherently apolitical, portraying them as organic or community-driven rather than strategic or power-laden.³ There is also a tendency to dismiss communal violence as an unavoidable aspect of everyday life in conflict-affected societies, suggesting it is too deeply embedded to be addressed meaningfully.⁴ Both views oversimplify the issue, overlooking the need for well-structured political interventions to address the root causes of communal violence and promote sustainable peace.

Beyond these problematic views of communal violence and local peace processes lies a broader tension in the UN’s approach to peace operations. Peace operations seeks to both pursue political solutions and prioritize the protection of civilians through military means. On the one hand, the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) stressed the “primacy of politics” in peace operations, noting that “lasting peace is not achieved nor sustained by military and technical engagements, but through political solutions.”⁵ This principle has become the guiding framework for modern UN peacekeeping. On the other hand, missions mandated to protect civilians often face pressure to balance political goals with immediate protection needs. As a result, their focus overwhelmingly remains on physical protection through military force rather than political dialogue to resolve local conflicts, even though dialogue is a cornerstone of the UN’s POC framework.⁶

This brief presents a case study on political engagement to protect civilians in Batangafo, a town in the Ouham prefecture of the Central African Republic (CAR). Batangafo has experienced high levels of communal violence between Muslims and Christians, as well as between the predominantly Muslim ex-Séléka and primarily Christian anti-balaka groups. While the UN has not established a peacekeeping base in Batangafo, both uniformed and civilian UN personnel have undertaken temporary missions there. This case study examines how UN support for local peace processes through these temporary missions has contributed to civilian protection, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges. It underscores the importance of prioritizing local-level political solutions for civilian protection while also demonstrating how broader political dynamics have made sustainable protection in Batangafo highly challenging.

2 Allard Duursma, “Non-State Conflicts, Peacekeeping, and the Conclusion of Local Agreements,” *Peacebuilding* 10, no. 2 (2022).

3 Roger Mac Ginty, *International Peacebuilding and Local Resistance: Hybrid Forms of Peace* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 51.

4 Interview with UN political affairs officer in Khartoum, November 14, 2014.

5 UN General Assembly and UN Security Council, *Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on Uniting Our Strengths for Peace: Politics, Partnership and People*, UN Doc. A/70/95-S/2015/446, June 17, 2015, p. 10.

6 UN Department of Peace Operations, “Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping Handbook,” 2020.

The first section outlines what political solutions to communal conflict entail and how UN peace missions can help facilitate such solutions. The second section examines the Batangafo case study, and the final section offers key recommendations.

How Peacekeeping Operations Can Support Political Solutions to Communal Conflicts

In the context of peacekeeping, a political solution can be understood as one “where parties reach negotiated, inclusive agreements to halt the killing and attempt to address the major grievances that triggered the violent conflict or are likely to trigger further violent conflict.”⁷ Such solutions generally provide a “comprehensive framework for a sustainable transition to peace, and a clear set of commonly agreed elements for achieving it.”⁸

While peacekeeping has always been centered on deploying military forces in support of political solutions, the concept of “the primacy of politics” gained particular prominence with the release of the HIPPO report in 2015.⁹ The primacy of politics underscores that pursuing a negotiated settlement to armed conflict is the foremost priority of a peace operation. The 2018 Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) declaration reinforced this principle, affirming the commitment of UN peacekeeping operations to “stronger engagement to advance political solutions to conflict and to pursue complementary political objectives and integrated strategies.”¹⁰ In practice, this means that efforts to achieve political solutions should guide the design and implementation of all other mandated tasks.

Although the primacy of politics is often associated

with national-level conflicts, it is equally crucial for addressing communal conflicts. UN policymakers in New York are increasingly focusing on developing policies that strengthen the engagement of peacekeeping operations in support of sustainable local peace processes. For example, in 2023, the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations (C34) requested the secretary-general to “provide guidance to peacekeeping operations on how missions can better support community-based mechanisms with a view to supporting sustainable political solutions, where mandated.”¹¹

However, applying the primacy of politics to communal conflict presents distinct challenges. Because such conflicts frequently unfold at the local level, the search for political solutions differs in at least three respects. First, while the UN special representative of the secretary-general (SRSG) typically leads national-level efforts, local political solutions are more often spearheaded by individual field offices. Second, addressing local conflicts involves tackling numerous smaller, localized disputes rather than a single, overarching national-level conflict. Third, these solutions are inherently shaped by the specific issues driving local conflicts.¹²

The Central African Republic (CAR) provides a compelling example of the primacy of politics at the local level, with over sixty agreements since 2013 addressing issues such as local power-sharing, freedom of movement, confidence-building measures, and the return of displaced persons. These agreements underscore the importance of adapting peacekeeping to support locally driven processes that foster sustainable peace and, in turn, protect civilians over the long term. As the case of Batangafo demonstrates, this requires not only political will but also the operational capacity of missions to engage beyond the actions of uniformed peacekeepers.

7 Adam Day et al., “The Political Practice of Peacekeeping: How Strategies for Peace Operations Are Developed and Implemented,” United Nations University Centre for Policy Research and Stimson, 2020, p. 5.

8 Ibid.

9 UN Doc. A/70/95-S/2015/446.

10 United Nations, “Action for Peacekeeping: Declaration of Shared Commitments on UN Peacekeeping Operations,” August 16, 2018, p. 5.

11 UN General Assembly, *Report of the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations: 2024 Substantive Session*, UN Doc. A/77/19, February 20–March 17, 2023, p. 90.

12 Allard Duursma and Jenna Russo, “The Primacy of Politics at the Local Level in UN Peace Operations,” International Peace Institute, February 2025.

Protection through Peacemaking in Batangafo

Continuous peacemaking efforts in Batangafo, supported by MINUSCA, demonstrate the potential for missions to help reduce violence and enhance civilian protection in a complex setting of communal violence. Protecting civilians required political solutions that went beyond the interventions of uniformed peacekeepers. By backing locally driven forms of conflict resolution, MINUSCA enabled local actors to address underlying social and political tensions, creating a safer environment. While initially reactive, the mission's approach evolved with the permanent deployment of SURGE teams in Batangafo, enabling it to take a more proactive and sustained posture that reinforced local peace agreements. The conclusion of a national-level peace agreement in 2019 further strengthened local agreements, but the outbreak of a new rebellion in late 2020 exposed their vulnerability to broader national-level political disruptions.

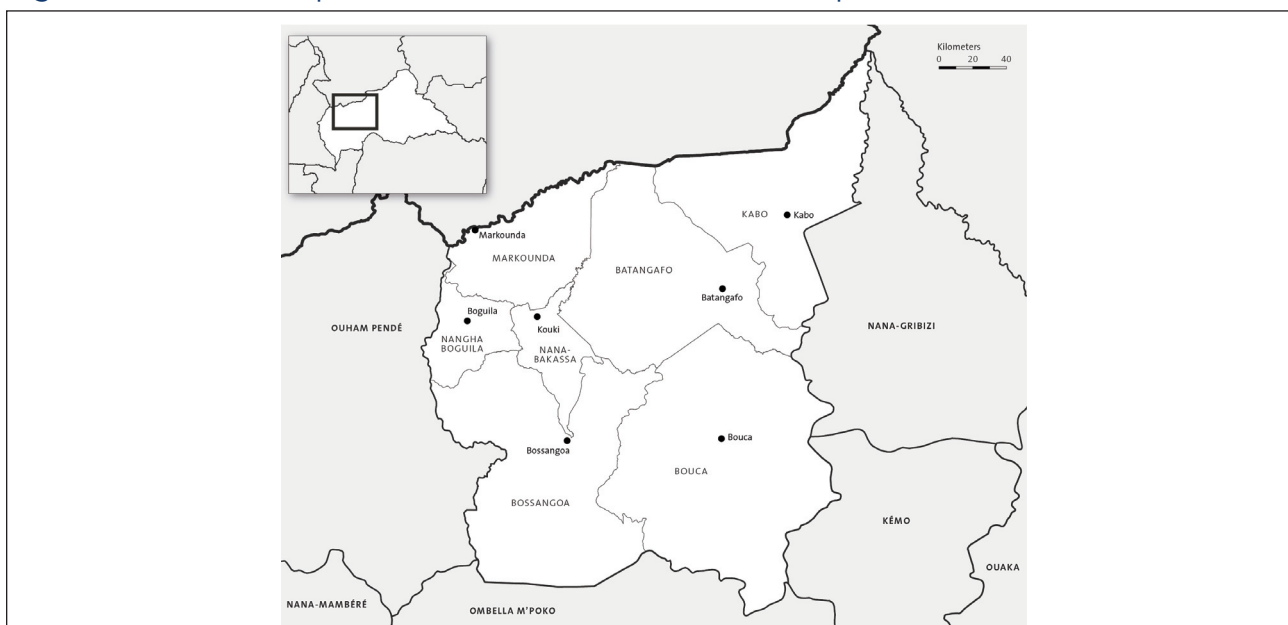
Although the primacy of politics is often associated with national-level conflicts, it is equally crucial for addressing communal conflicts.

Communal Conflict in CAR

The Central African Republic (CAR) has a history of coups and rebellions. In 2013, the Séléka, a coalition of rebel groups, seized Bangui, ousting President François Bozizé. This triggered widespread violence as anti-balaka militias emerged in response to escalating tensions between religious groups. The new president's disbanding of Séléka led to its fragmentation into factions—such as the Popular Front for the Rebirth of CAR (FPRC), Central African Patriotic Movement (MPC), and Union for Peace in CAR (UPC)—fueling continued clashes with anti-balaka militias as violence took on a communal character.¹³

The deployment of French forces in 2013 and the establishment of MINUSCA in 2014 aimed to stabilize the country. With a mandate that emphasizes peacebuilding and reconciliation, MINUSCA has since supported over sixty local agreements through dialogue, mediation, and coordination with communities, civil society, and international actors.¹⁴ Although no peacekeepers were stationed perma-

Figure 1. The Ouham prefecture in the Central African Republic¹⁵



13 Stephen W. Smith, "CAR's History: The Past of a Tense Present," in *Making Sense of the Central African Republic*, Tatiana Carayannis and Louisa Lombard, eds. (London: Zed Books, 2015).

14 UN Security Council Resolution 2149 (April 10, 2014), UN Doc. S/RES/2149.

15 This map is taken from: Allard Duursma, "State Weakness, a Fragmented Patronage-Based System, and Protracted Local Conflict in the Central African Republic," *African Affairs* 121, no. 483 (2022).

nently in Batangafo, MINUSCA began supporting a local peace initiative there in 2015 to address escalating violence between ex-Séléka and anti-balaka forces.

Localized violence in Batangafo can be attributed to four main factors. First, it was the only town in Ouham prefecture hosting two rival armed groups: multiple ex-Séléka factions (MPC, FPRC, and briefly UPC in 2016) and the anti-balaka. Second, Batangafo lies along a key transhumance corridor that both groups relied on for financing. Third, the Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) hospital located within the internally displaced persons (IDP) camp housing predominantly anti-balaka elements was challenging for Muslims to access without sparking conflict. Finally, beginning in 2015, the Muslim community expressed growing frustration over the perceived bias of the international community, as most aid was directed to the IDP camp while the largely Muslim Lakouanga neighborhood received minimal assistance. Together, these factors created a highly combustible environment ripe for communal violence.¹⁶

Batangafo Weapons-Free Zone Agreement (December 2015)

MINUSCA made its first visit to Batangafo in July 2015. Around this time, a local initiative led by the town's priest, imam, and community leaders was gaining momentum to ease tensions and prevent armed confrontations. A key driver of this initiative was the Muslim community's desire to access the MSF hospital in the nearby IDP camp, from which they had been largely barred by the anti-balaka and Christian populations. Despite these efforts, tensions flared in November 2015 when a local anti-balaka leader falsely accused the ex-Séléka of killing a Christian man—a claim refuted by the priest. In response, the imam wrote to the sub-prefect, condemning the rumor and warning of unrest if Muslims were targeted.¹⁷

MINUSCA civilian staff contacted General

Ngendourou, the senior ex-Séléka figure at the time, who assured them that there was no immediate threat. Nonetheless, distrust persisted between the Muslim and Christian communities. On November 16, 2015, three young Muslim men entered the IDP camp to test the sincerity of ongoing dialogue efforts, resulting in a Christian mob beating two of them to death. The third escaped to the Muslim neighborhood of Lakouanga and raised the alarm. The imam, young Muslim men, and ex-Séléka members went to retrieve the bodies, sparking clashes with the anti-balaka. The violence led to a fire that engulfed the IDP camp, destroying approximately 718 huts.

On November 17, 2015, a MINUSCA SURGE team—consisting of two UN police officers, one military observer, and one civilian staff member—arrived in Batangafo to assess the situation and support local mediation.¹⁸ This marked the MINUSCA Bossangoa field office's first significant peace effort in the town. Drawing on lessons from Bambari, where a weapons-free zone has been established, the team proposed a similar approach in Batangafo.¹⁹ A UN staff member who was part of the team that went to Batangafo recalled,

In the evening, during the debriefing, I asked my colleagues, “Why do we not suggest implementing what is happening in Bambari?” Because at that time, MINUSCA and armed groups had declared Bambari as a weapon-free zone. We will go tomorrow to talk to community leaders and to talk to the armed groups. Let's tell them that we have been instructed from Bangui to tell them Batangafo as a weapon-free zone.²⁰

With MINUSCA's support, the Catholic Church—led by Bishop Nestor-Désiré Nongo-Aziagbia of Bossangoa and the Episcopal Peace and Justice Commission (CEJP)—initiated a mediation process between the ex-Séléka zone commander and the local anti-balaka leader. This effort led to the Batangafo weapons-free zone agreement on

¹⁶ Telephone interview with UN staff member, December 16, 2020; Information provided by a local consultant, September 18, 2020.

¹⁷ Telephone interview with UN staff member, December 16, 2020.

¹⁸ A SURGE team typically rotates in two-week assignments to high-conflict areas.

¹⁹ UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), “Hervé Ladsous Announces Establishment of a Weapon-Free Zone in Bambari,” press release, September 8, 2015.

²⁰ Interview with UN staff member, December 2020.

December 12, 2015. The agreement committed armed groups to cease carrying weapons within Batangafo; relocate their bases outside of private homes, the Lakouanga neighborhood, and the IDP camp; and refrain from extractive practices targeting civilians. It also established a framework for cooperation with local authorities, with the possibility of intervention by MINUSCA and the government if the agreement was violated.

While reducing violence was the primary goal of the agreement, it also created economic incentives for armed groups to remain committed. The agreement enabled the return of Peuhl herders, allowing armed groups to collect grazing fees, tax cattle, and profit from trade—revenue critical for maintaining the loyalty of their fighters.²¹

Continuous peacemaking efforts in Batangafo, supported by MINUSCA, demonstrate the potential for missions to help reduce violence and enhance civilian protection in a complex setting of communal violence.

This episode illustrates how peacekeeping missions can leverage their convening power and comparative experiences to catalyze local political processes. However, the fragility of the agreement also reveals the limits of such interventions when they are not backed by a sustained presence or broader political coherence.

Nonaggression Pact (March 2016)

The weapons-free zone agreement initially eased tensions between Muslim and Christian communities in Batangafo, but unrest resurfaced in February 2016 with the arrival of anti-balaka leader Dieudonné Ngaïbona, known as “Colonel Djié.” Previously based in Bouca, Ngaïbona had fled after being accused of burying a woman alive for alleged witchcraft, causing a rift within the anti-balaka ranks. Upon reaching Batangafo, he rallied fighters, ousted local anti-balaka leader René Ninga, and openly rejected the weapons-free zone agreement, challenging ex-Séléka leader General Ngendourou.²²

Ngendourou warned MINUSCA that he would burn

down the IDP camp if Ngaïbona was not removed. MINUSCA civilian staff engaged intensively with Ngendourou to de-escalate the situation, urging restraint and working through the head of office to avoid retaliatory violence. With over eighteen documented violations, MINUSCA ordered the Cameroonian battalion to arrest Ngaïbona.

Although Ngaïbona’s arrest temporarily eased tensions, the situation in Batangafo remained fragile and required renewed peace efforts. Some Christians protested his detention, believing he had protected them from the ex-Séléka. His presence had already undermined the weapons-free zone, as fear and mistrust led both armed groups to resume carrying weapons.²³

In response, a new peace initiative emerged, led primarily by Christian and Muslim youth and supported by MINUSCA. They quickly brought representatives of both the anti-balaka and the ex-Séléka factions into the peace process.²⁴ Building on the December 2015 weapons-free zone agreement, the renewed talks led to a nonaggression pact signed on March 29, 2016, by Muslim and Christian youth, as well as representatives of both armed groups.²⁵ The agreement called for the free movement of people and goods, the deployment of state security and justice forces, and the reopening of the local school for both Muslim and Christian students.²⁶ The pact successfully reduced violence in Batangafo, with MINUSCA and local authorities using it as a framework for ongoing mediation between the armed groups.

This agreement illustrates the operational benefit of youth-led engagement. However, as the next section shows, it also exposed the difficulty of sustaining such efforts without institutional support and resources from the national level.

²¹ Duursma, “State Weakness.”

²² Marie-Joëlle Zahar and Delphine Mechoulan, “Peace by Pieces? Local Mediation and Sustainable Peace in the Central African Republic,” International Peace Institute, November 2017, p. 26.

²³ Interview with UN staff member, December 2020.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ UN Department of Political Affairs, “Local Peace Processes Monthly Tracking Table,” February 2019; Zahar and Mechoulan, “Peace by Pieces?” p. 26; Interview with UN staff member, December 2020.

²⁶ Zahar and Mechoulan, “Peace by Pieces?” p. 25.

First Agreement between Batangafo's Armed Groups (February 2018)

Despite the relative success of MINUSCA and local authorities in preventing mass violence following the March 2016 nonaggression agreement, underlying communal issues in Batangafo persisted. Control over key sites, such as the MSF hospital and the Ouham River crossing, remained disputed, with armed groups frequently setting up illegal checkpoints to collect taxes.

In August 2017, MINUSCA and its local community liaison assistant urged both parties to allow free access to the MSF hospital and river. Although the anti-balaka agreed to vacate the hospital area, they continued to intermingle with IDPs, limiting access for Muslims. Local authorities, with MINUSCA's support, convened weekly security meetings to manage these tensions.²⁷

While these meetings helped prevent major outbreaks of violence through most of late 2017, serious fighting resumed in February 2018, resulting in the destruction of the Batangafo IDP camp. In response, MINUSCA and local leaders mediated a new peace process, culminating in an agreement between Batangafo's armed groups on February 24, 2018. Signed by representatives of both ex-Séléka and anti-balaka, the agreement called for free movement, cooperation on IDP return, and implementation of a community violence reduction program.²⁸

The agreement had an immediate impact: movement of people and goods resumed, collaboration between armed group leaders improved, and many IDPs returned. MINUSCA's joint civilian and uniformed efforts played a critical role in these developments. In May 2018, Batangafo's mayor, with MINUSCA's support, successfully persuaded armed factions from nearby regions to withdraw, helping to maintain local stability.²⁹

Second Agreement between Batangafo's Armed Groups (January 2019)

While the February 2018 peace agreement initially improved security in Batangafo, tensions re-emerged by mid-2018. In July, a former anti-balaka commander set up a second base near the town, increasing the group's presence and violating the agreement by carrying weapons. The mayor convened a meeting with community leaders, MINUSCA, and anti-balaka commanders, urging them to remove armed members from the IDP camp, but friction between the anti-balaka and ex-Séléka persisted. On October 31, 2018, ex-Séléka forces launched a major attack on Batangafo, looting and burning large parts of the town, including the IDP camp, which they believed was sheltering anti-balaka fighters. The violence displaced more than 20,000 people. Additional incidents, including an ambush on a health ministry delegation and the abduction of a Muslim resident, further inflamed tensions.³⁰

Despite mediation efforts by MINUSCA and local leaders, armed confrontations between ex-Séléka and anti-balaka forces continued into November 2018, causing extensive destruction. In response, MINUSCA increased patrols and deployed a joint protection team (JPT). The JPT determined that the attack on the IDP camp had been planned by ex-Séléka forces, with support from the Muslim community, as part of a strategy to force the camp's relocation outside Batangafo. Ex-Séléka leaders told the JPT they considered Batangafo to be under their control and intended to expel the anti-balaka. Upon returning to Bossangoa, the JPT reported a serious breakdown in relations between Batangafo's Muslim and Christian communities and recommended that MINUSCA adopt an "active posture" by maintaining a strong presence in populated areas and ensuring free access to the MSF hospital.³¹

27 Presentation by Nestor Guiama, sub-prefect in Batangafo (2017–2018), workshop on local peace processes, Bangui, January 15, 2019.

28 MINUSCA, civil affairs daily sitrep, February 5, 2018.

29 MINUSCA, civil affairs daily sitrep, May 10, 2018.

30 International Crisis Group, "Making the Central African Republic's Latest Peace Agreement Stick," 2019, p. 3; Médecins Sans Frontières, "Unprotected: Summary of Internal Review on the October 31st Events in Batangafo, Central African Republic," February 2019.

31 MINUSCA, civil affairs daily sitrep, November 20, 2018.

This increased presence helped prevent further large-scale violence and created the conditions necessary for renewed peace efforts. In early December 2018, MINUSCA civilian staff and troops, working alongside local authorities, mediated between the ex-Séléka and anti-balaka. The sub-prefect, supported by MINUSCA's community liaison assistant, played a central role by collaborating with armed groups and community leaders to reach a new agreement to stabilize the situation. These efforts culminated in a renewed agreement between the armed groups on January 9, 2019.³²

The new agreement was endorsed through a community signing ceremony and peace march. It led to a significant reduction in violence and enabled 90 percent of the displaced population to return from the MSF hospital to the IDP camp. Symbolic acts, such as ex-Séléka and anti-balaka leaders sharing a meal, reinforced the parties' commitment to peace.³³ As with the previous three local agreements, this accord reduced violence and contributed meaningfully to the protection of civilians.

Sustained civilian deployments, empowered local offices, and flexible resources to support dialogue are essential for an effective protection strategy.

National-Level Peace Agreement and Enhanced Security in Batangafo

While the series of local agreements concluded in Batangafo prior to 2019 contributed meaningfully to civilian protection, the absence of supportive national-level dynamics limited their long-term effectiveness. Without a unifying national framework, local peace efforts were often undermined by the economic interests of armed groups, leading to recurrent violence.³⁴

The January 2019 local peace agreement in Batangafo marked the first agreement in the Ouham prefecture to benefit directly from

national-level progress. The Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in CAR (APPR), signed in Bangui on February 6, 2019, provided a new framework that encouraged local armed groups to commit to peace.³⁵ It reinforced local agreements that had helped manage the many local actors in Batangafo and encouraged them to observe the principles of nonaggression and free movement more consistently. For the first time in years, no major armed clashes occurred in Batangafo in 2019, which a UN staff member attributed to the alignment of local peace efforts with national-level progress.³⁶

The APPR also laid the groundwork for addressing local conflict drivers by establishing structures such as the prefectural implementation committee (*comité de mise en oeuvre préfectoral*) designed to foster collaboration between armed groups, local authorities, and civil society under MINUSCA's guidance. In Ouham, the implementation committee brought together representatives from the anti-balaka and ex-Séléka, as well as religious leaders and members of youth groups and women's associations.

In parallel, the deployment of MINUSCA's SURGE teams in Batangafo throughout 2019 ensured a consistent civilian presence that helped manage localized disputes before they escalated. According to MINUSCA staff, these teams played a vital role in maintaining direct and sustained contact with diverse community actors.³⁷

In sum, the APPR provided a crucial framework that reinforced local peace agreements and reduced violence in Batangafo in 2019. Whereas earlier efforts were constrained by the absence of national support, the APPR enabled local peace initiatives to take root, contributing to a year of relative calm.

However, this stability was short-lived. In late 2020, the formation of the Coalition of Patriots for

32 MINUSCA, civil affairs daily sitrep, January 30, 2020.

33 MINUSCA, civil affairs daily sitrep, January 30, 2020.

34 Duursma, "State Weakness".

35 International Crisis Group, "Making the Central African Republic's Latest Peace Agreement Stick," pp. 7-10.

36 Interview with UN staff member, December 2020.

37 Ibid.

Change (CPC)—led by former President François Bozizé—marked a sharp reversal. The CPC united several armed groups, including factions of the ex-Séléka and anti-balaka, in armed opposition to the government. Although Central African government forces, backed by Russian mercenaries and Rwandan special forces, regained control of many major towns, including Batangafo, the rise of the CPC ushered in renewed insecurity.³⁸

The CPC rebellion underscored the vulnerability of local peace agreements to national-level dynamics. While the APPR and local agreements temporarily fostered stability, the CPC's resurgence showed how national conflicts can quickly undermine local gains. In regions like Batangafo, national power struggles are deeply intertwined with local issues, leaving security highly fragile and civilians unprotected.

For MINUSCA and other missions confronting communal violence, the Batangafo case underscores the need to recalibrate the balance between military deterrence and political engagement. Sustained civilian deployments, empowered local offices, and flexible resources to support dialogue are essential for an effective protection strategy. This experience also highlights the importance of tracking and learning from local agreements, identifying enabling factors, and ensuring their integration into national peace processes.

Sustainable protection in fragile regions like Batangafo depends on aligning local and national peace processes.

Conclusion and Lessons Learned

Local peace efforts in Batangafo, supported in various ways by MINUSCA, were effective in reducing communal violence and enhancing civilian protection. Four main lessons can be derived from MINUSCA's efforts to advance both political solutions and POC in the Central African Republic.

First, protecting civilians in the context of communal conflict requires political solutions—not just military ones. By adapting its approach to support locally driven forms of conflict resolution in Batangafo, MINUSCA addressed underlying drivers of violence and empowered local actors to engage in dialogue and settle disputes, ultimately creating a safer and more stable environment for civilians.

Second, continuous and proactive dialogue creates space for local leaders to prevent conflict escalation and reinforce the sustainability of local peace agreements. In Batangafo, political engagement was initially reactive—typical of many peacekeeping operations that tend to adopt a one-off approach to local-level engagement.³⁹ This ad hoc approach stems not only from chronic staff and resource constraints but also from institutional tendencies to prioritize local conflict only when it results in significant casualties.⁴⁰ The permanent deployment of SURGE teams in 2019, coupled with strong cooperation with local authorities, enabled MINUSCA to maintain a continuous presence. This shift from a reactive to a proactive posture allowed for earlier and more consistent interventions that created space for local leaders—including youth and religious representatives—to de-escalate tensions and reinforce agreements.

Third, while the economic motives of armed groups can complicate local peacemaking, they can also be leveraged to incentivize peace. By aligning dialogue and agreements with tangible economic benefits—such as facilitating Peuhl trading routes or ensuring safe passage for herders—local peace efforts can appeal to the financial interests of armed groups, offering them a vested interest in maintaining stability, thus reducing conflict. This highlights the need for a sound understanding of the political economy of communal conflict and how it shapes both risks and opportunities for peace. Concretely, this points

38 International Crisis Group, "Ten Years after the Coup, Is the Central African Republic Facing Another Major Crisis?" March 22, 2023; Corbeau News, "RCA : après la ville de Kaga-Bandoro, c'est le tour de Batangafo d'être reprise par l'armée nationale." April 12, 2021.

39 Jana Krause, "Stabilization and Local Conflicts: Communal and Civil War in South Sudan," *Ethnopolitics* 18, no. 5 (2019).

40 Tom O'Bryan, Sara Rendtorff-Smith, and Marco Donati, "The Role of United Nations Peacekeeping Operations in Addressing Local Conflicts: A Study of Practice," UN Departments of Peacekeeping Operations and Field Support, 2017, p. 18.

to the importance of maintaining a continued commitment to integrating political-economy analysis into the integrated mission planning process, leveraging analysis from the joint mission analysis center (JMAC) to understand how armed groups may be motivated by economics, and training and tasking civil affairs personnel to systematically collect information on economic structures and incentives.

Fourth, sustainable protection in fragile regions like Batangafo depends on aligning local and national peace processes. The APPR helped stabilize the region by reinforcing local agreements within a national framework, whereas the CPC rebellion exposed the fragility of such agreements in the face of national upheaval. This case underscores the importance of integrated approaches that connect national political dynamics with local-level peacebuilding efforts. At the same time, it also reinforces the need for realistic expectations about what local peace processes can achieve: when

national conditions deteriorate, even the most effective local initiatives may unravel. Ultimately, sustained civilian protection requires a multi-track peace process that meaningfully bridges national and local efforts.

Amid tightening peacekeeping budgets and increasingly volatile political environments, the Batangafo case underscores the need to deepen ongoing efforts to recalibrate peacekeeping strategies. While many missions have already moved beyond purely reactive military deployments in their protection efforts, Batangafo highlights the importance of prioritizing sustained investments in civilian-led political engagement and infrastructure for dialogue. This shift requires both strategic and structural adjustments, including reallocating resources to strengthen missions' capacity for field-level political engagement and systematically integrating local dialogue into mission-wide planning cycle.

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