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By Timothy D. Mitchell

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Timothy D. Mitchell is an Adjunct Research Staff Member in the Africa Program at the Institute for Defense Analyses.



In this Sunday, September 9, 2018, file photo, a health worker feeds a boy suspected of having the Ebola virus at an Ebola treatment center in Beni, Eastern Congo. (Source: AP Photo/Al-hadji Kudra Maliro, File.)

THE EVOLVING CONFLICT IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

By Austin Swift

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Map of the Central African Republic, depicting Bria, where militias vie for control of lucrative diamond mines. (Source: "Central African Republic," CIA Factbook, January 01, 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ct.html>.)

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Ebola in the DRC

In late July 2018, the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) officially declared an end to the ninth breakout of Ebola in the DRC since the disease's discovery in 1976. Less than two weeks later, the WHO officially declared [another breakout](#) of Ebola, this time in the Kivu region of the DRC, a location roughly 2,000 kilometers from the previous breakout. This is the third outbreak of Ebola to hit the DRC in the past two years. The most recent count shows the current outbreak with over [600](#) confirmed cases and 370 deaths due to the disease. While this outbreak is larger than the previous second largest outbreak of Ebola (425 confirmed cases in the 2000 outbreak in Uganda), it still pales in comparison to the 2014 Ebola epidemic that ravaged West Africa and took the lives of over [11,000 people](#) in six different countries.

What Makes This Outbreak Different?

In many ways the current outbreak is similar to previous ones. The Ebola virus is [introduced](#) into the human population through direct contact (via an open wound or mucous membrane) with blood or other fluids from animals, usually fruit bats and primates found sick or dead in the forest. As in most recent outbreaks, this Ebola episode started in a remote region and then spread to more urban areas as the sick sought health care. The key to containing and then stopping the spread of the disease is treatment and contact tracing, both of which are made more difficult by lack of trust in the government and traditional burial practices associated with some of the victims. This outbreak was also similar to others in that early on, there were reports of violence against health care workers and of a local community "stealing" the body of a dead Ebola victim to prevent a [safe burial](#). With experience and the support of WHO, the DRC has proven capable of containing previous Ebola outbreaks. What makes this outbreak different is that it is the first one to occur in a war zone.

Insecurity in the Eastern DRC

Far from the capital of Kinshasa, the eastern DRC is well known for its general lack of security, and over the years, the region has served as home to numerous rebel groups. The most active rebel group at the moment is the [Allied Democratic Forces](#) (ADF), which was forced out of Uganda in 1995. Since 2014, hundreds of civilian deaths in the eastern DRC have been attributed to the ADF. In August 2018, a deadly attack on DRC forces near Beni, a city of over 200,000 people, led the United States to pull [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) personnel from the field. They have not returned. In the past month alone, the ADF has been responsible for [47 deaths](#), including those of eight UN peacekeepers in or near Beni. These ongoing attacks have forced residents from their homes. The UN Refugee Agency estimates that there are currently over a [million](#) displaced persons in eastern DRC.

To compound matters, presidential elections were held in the DRC in late December. Because of the ongoing security and health concerns in eastern DRC, the government in mid-December decided to delay the elections in



In this Sunday, September 9, 2018, file photo, a health worker feeds a boy suspected of having the Ebola virus at an Ebola treatment center in Beni, Eastern Congo. (Source: AP Photo/Al-hadji Kudra Maliro, File.)

Beni until [March 2019](#), months after the official election results are likely to have been released. This decision, which effectively deprived over a million people of their right to vote, was met with protests. Ebola facilities were [attacked](#), and health team operations were suspended for days. At least six international [NGOs](#), including both *Medecins Sans Frontieres* and Oxfam, had been providing critical assistance to WHO and the DRC Ministry of Health. Both organizations pulled out at least portions of their staff pending improvement in the security situation. WHO's [operations](#) were notably affected during the last week in December as the ongoing violence limited its ability to get into the field to track contacts and administer vaccines. Administering effective treatment and conducting contact tracing, both of which are vital in halting the spread of Ebola, are challenging at best in this environment.

Progress in the Midst of the Chaos

Despite the challenges, there is much to be commended in the current response. In stark contrast to the 2014 outbreak in West Africa in which WHO was widely criticized for responding too slowly, [vaccinators](#) were on the ground in eastern DRC within a week of the outbreak. WHO estimates that by mid-October, just two months after the initial outbreak, over 450 NGOs were deployed in support of the Ebola response. Another bright spot is that [vaccines](#) have been widely used for the first time and are proving effective. Just as important, the vaccines are being accepted by the majority of Congolese. One survey showed that 82 percent of [respondents](#) would support using the vaccine on a family member. Furthermore, to help prevent the spread of Ebola into neighboring countries, both [Uganda](#) and South Sudan have taken the unprecedented step of vaccinating frontline health care workers in advance of Ebola actually spreading within their borders.

The Road Ahead

Progress is being made, but this epidemic is likely far from [over](#). New outbreaks continue to occur, and the lack of security, coupled with villagers' initial distrust of outside help, make getting ahead of the outbreak difficult. Although a large spike in cases like what was seen in West Africa in 2014 is unlikely, a more probable scenario is more of the same: continued outbreaks that are difficult to treat and trace due to the lack of security. The larger concern is the possibility of Ebola spreading to a neighboring country, particularly South Sudan, itself in the midst of prolonged conflict with an extremely weak central government. It is not likely that South Sudan would be able to quickly contain a large outbreak.

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Anatomy of the Conflict

A former French colony that became independent in 1960, the Central African Republic has a long history of military coups, political instability, and foreign intervention. The path to failed state and widespread criminality is a complex [history](#) of marginalization and the politics of exclusion.

From 1981 to 2003, the Central African Republic teetered on the verge of chaos due to continuous instability, coups, and strongman politics to such an extent that the UN eventually deployed peacekeepers to the country. In 2003, former army chief-François Bozizé seized power in Bangui. The ascension of Bozizé acted as the catalyst for the [Central African Bush War](#), which broke out in 2004 between government forces and the Union of Democratic Forces for Unity (UFDR) rebels. Under the leadership of Michel Djotodia, the UFDR aligned various northern rebel groups from the predominantly Muslim north under an ethno-nationalist banner. By 2012, a series of peace deals had failed, and the UFDR alliance rebranded itself as the [Séléka](#). Operating in the lawless northeast, the Séléka ranks included mercenaries from Chad and Sudan. During its march to Bangui, the Séléka employed [scorched earth](#) tactics of murder and rape, prompting the formation of [anti-balaka](#) ("anti-machete") militias, composed primarily of Christian and Animist contingents. On March 24, 2013, the Séléka overthrew the government and installed Michel Djotodia as president.

Chaos in the Central African Republic

Before 2012, the religious [composition](#) of the Central African Republic was roughly 85 percent Christian and 15 percent Muslim. The geographic marginalization of northern Central African Republic had left the Muslim community economically isolated. In September 2013, President Djotodia disbanded the Séléka after losing control of the alliance. Following his ouster, François Bozizé [fanned](#) his Christian base against the Muslim community. Street warfare erupted in the capital, as Christian self-defense units flooded the capital, killing almost [1,000](#) people. Refusing to disarm, ex-Séléka militias are still active throughout the country. In December 2014, the UN Commission of Inquiry [reported](#) that more than 80 percent of the Muslim population had fled into Chad and Cameroon, and 417 of the country's 436 mosques were destroyed. Both sides would eventually be accused of genocide and crimes against humanity. In 2016, Faustin-Archange Touadera was [elected](#)

and became president of a country dominated by militias. Attempting to stabilize the country, the African Union and France mobilized [12,000](#) peacekeepers.

Established in 2014, and headquartered in Bangui, United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) has invested millions of dollars in seeking to quell violence in the Central African Republic. Unable to maintain control outside of urban centers, the “blue helmets” struggle to enforce peace. They are hampered by their limited mandate and inability to disarm the splintering auto-defense groups that routinely mutate from their Séléka and anti-balaka foundations. In an effort to challenge MINUSCA troops, former Séléka alliance militias are bypassing the arms embargo and importing weapons from [traffickers](#) in Sudan. In January 2019, a UN report [concluded](#) the arms were being supplied by an Arab militia in Darfur. And while the UN struggles to combat endemic violence, more than half population of the Central African Republic needs humanitarian aid and is on the brink of [famine](#).

Increasing Criminality

The increasingly frequent utilization of religious rhetoric by political and military leaders over the past several years has inflamed Muslim and Christian tensions, as elites use religion and ethnic differences to mobilize villagers into death squads. But religious tensions in the Central African Republic are a relatively new phenomenon. The precursor to mass violence in the Central African Republic can be traced to patterns of land usage, [cattle wars](#), and the struggle for control of natural resources. The ad hoc nature of the ex-Séléka and anti-balaka coalitions have led to a misunderstanding of their origin. The existence of self-defense groups is not a new occurrence. But the lack of state services and security has contributed to the evolution of violence into a [turf war](#), with former Muslim and Christian alliances splintering and fighting over mineral resources and supply routes. Former militiamen are reverting to banditry along [rivers](#) and roads, capitalizing on regional insecurity for a payout.

Rebel militias survive via [informal economies](#) of corruption, using bribery and poaching to fuel their endeavors. Filling gaps left by the absence of governance, armed groups enforce customs rules, collect taxes, and extract bribes. In rural Central African Republic, warlords control sizable fiefdoms and lucrative markets for timber, bush meat, and diamonds. As of January 2019, violence continues to escalate, with more than [12,000](#) people displaced into the forests near Bakouma. Weapons are continuing to flow into the country, as gangs and militias rearm.

Conclusion

Perhaps the greatest hurdle to peace in the Central African Republic is the protracted history of political elites pitting once harmonious Muslim and Christian communities against each other. At stake is control of valuable natural resources. In this situation, continuation of the United Nations peace operation seems well justified.

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