

COPING WITH SETTLER STATUS: THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC'S REFUGEES IN CAMEROON

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ABSTRACT: The African continent has experienced many conflicts since the 1960s when most of the countries in the continent attained independence from colonial rule that lasted close to seven decades. These conflicts range from ritualized vendettas of tribal societies to the revolutionary guerillas of modern times. The excitement that greeted Africa's independence soon dissipated as the continent got engulfed in civil wars. These civil wars produced many refugees that migrated into neighboring relatively peaceful countries. Between 2002-2016, the Central African Republic was involved in a civil war that forced the victims to migrate to neighboring countries including Cameroon. The paper identifies the areas in Cameroon where the CAR refugees settled, examined the difficulties they encountered and are encountering and their resilience strategies. It argues that the migrants and the indigenous people of Cameroon have impacted each other through social integration and other resilience factors that have enabled these refugees to cope in Cameroon. The study is based on the use of primary sources such as interviews that were carried out in their areas of refuge. The responses were carefully analyzed using the historiographical method of corroboration of facts. Archival materials were also used in addition. Also, secondary sources such as books articles in international and local journals were consulted and keenly analyzed to arrive at its conclusions.

Keywords: *Migrant, resilience, conflict, settlers, refugees.*

Introduction

Migration refers to the non-voluntary movement of persons beyond their areas of origin. These movements are orchestrated by so many factors that range from environmental, social, and political to economic. Recently, violent conflicts and threats to conflict have become the highest producers of migrants in Africa as was the case in conflict ridden Central African Republic (CAR) from 2002-2016, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi and Rwanda amongst others. Migration entails spatial relocation of people that involves their permanent or temporary change of residence. Migration can be a result of wars as in the Central African Republic, however there are also situations of economic and social migrants. Ethnic conflicts in many areas of Africa have necessitated the migration of people. Environmental factors also contributed to the migration as people fled from barren areas to areas with greener and agricultural opportunities. Some however, migrate for want of job opportunities in other countries to better their livelihood. Between 2002 and 2016, there was a civil war in the Central African Republic. This resulted in the displacement of persons with some eventually finding themselves as refugees in the Republic of Cameroon. These refugees/migrants while in Cameroon went through enormous challenges of coping in the new environment. The paper examines the factors that led to the massive migration of Central Africans into Cameroon, the challenges they faced and still face and their coping strategies.

The CAR Conflict

The post-colonial history of the CAR shows how the use of force became the most effective strategy to take over power by those who wanted to occupy political office. Political leaders used the national army as a military instrument to gain power. Presidents built up an army that they could trust, mainly composed of officers who shared their respective ethnic background. As such, the incoming presidents were always under threat from at least part of the soldiers that remained loyal to the ousted president. This was the fate of Françoise Bozize who took over power in a coup d'état in March 2003. From the onset, he was confronted with armed opposition groups challenging his authority especially in the north and East of the country. Several armed opposition groups challenging Bozize formed the Seleka Alliance in 2012 and staged attacks from the North-East of the country moving towards Bangui, and eventually resulting to the coup of March 2013. While the

Seleka were in power, they perpetrated serious crimes against the civilian population. At the end of 2013, long standing village self-defense groups united to fight against the Seleka calling themselves the Anti-balaka. The violence between the Seleka and the Anti-Balaka perpetuated the crisis as bloodshed resulted in mistrust fear and desire to revenge. Given the breakdown of law and order, the crisis became a combination of conflicts with national and local dimensions as well as violent crime. The antecedents of this conflict can be explained in terms of the following.

This conflict must be understood in historical context. For centuries, the country had been a place of exploitation by a multiplicity of foreign actors. Before the French arrived the territory from 1885, it was dominated by Sultans connected to the Trans-Saharan economic and social networks. The area then became both a zone for slave traders who supplied the Saharan and Nile slave routes and refugee communities fleeing these raiders. This dynamics contributed to the diversity and mobility in the region's people and the strong tradition of self-defense and resistance among communities targeted by outside forces.

Successive government in the Central African Republic exhibited a long standing lack of interest and capacity to develop the country and this added to the centralized nature of governance to serve as a primary cause and a driving force in the conflict. By failing to fulfil its sovereign responsibilities including providing security and basic services and guaranteeing human rights, the government of Francois Bozize created conditions in the provinces ripe for rebellion as his government in the eyes of those in the provinces lost all traces of legitimacy. Following the coup d'état of Michele Djotodia, the state disintegrated and the political establishment was discredited. This was compounded by the failure of the transitional government of Catherine Samba Panza to implement the resolutions of the May 2015 Bangui Forum and the transition roadmap. In the provinces, people felt almost completely alienated from politics. This was partly because politicians rarely lived in provinces and because of the centralized nature of the government system. This situation of political alienation and the colossal failure of the government in terms of social delivery contributed to the crisis that eventually resulted in migrations in search of a better life.

The inability of the state to provide security across the national territory led to the proliferation of armed groups and the growth of the zones of control. This made the influence of the government to be felt only in the capital Bangui and major provincial

towns. Armed groups then took advantage of this vacuum to assure control of rural areas and imposed their own laws there. The armed groups engaged themselves in banditry and harassment of the local populations as a means of generating the required income and food to sustain themselves. This structured banditry became a main threat to rural communities. The clashes between these armed groups and the inability of the state security forces to intervene decisively and protect the people exposed the weakness of the state security forces to guarantee security across the national territory. This problem of insecurity and the proliferation of local militias served as a driving force behind the conflict.

Between 2006 and 2012, the security situation in the entire country deteriorated. This was however more problematic in the North East Region. The combination of ethnically constituted rebellious bandits and self-defense militias gave rise to systemic violence. The Vakaga and Bamingui-Bangoran Prefectures were gradually “Darfurised” or absorbed into the Darfur conflict and economic system. The town of Birao in the Vakaga Prefecture is the gateway to Southern Darfur and most of its traders are Sudanese and the currency used in the market is Sudanese. Out of this cross-border conflict system emerged a cartel of rebel movements which in 2012 joined forces to serve their common interest under the name Seleka. This Seleka Alliance shared a common grievance which was that of, the deep poverty of their home provinces and their historic neglect by successive governments in Bangui. This neglect accounted for the conflict that forced many citizens of the CAR to seek refuge in neighboring countries including Cameroon.

The long term socio-economic crisis in the CAR deprived a large proportion of Central African youths of both access to education and job opportunities. This neglect contributed to the conflict. A closed political class and an acute lack of educational or economic opportunities mean that the chances of the average Central African being able to change their situation in life positively were very minimal. The country had an extremely young population and a huge percentage of these youths had not completed primary education and the overwhelming majority held no formal employment. Many of these youths were idle and regularly experienced food insecurity and were traumatized by their repeated exposure to violence and felt marginalized by a political system which existed seemingly to serve the political elite. This lack of hope for the youths and their frustrations made them potential recruits into the various militia groups that used them to sustain the conflict.

Developing an inclusive national ideology in the Central African Republic that could promote resilience against extremist narratives had always been a challenge to successive administrations in the country. Before colonial rule, the area was populated by a disparate mix of ethnic groups. The Trans-Saharan slave trade, in addition to decades of influence over the Central African Republic's political system by Muslim-Chadian and Sudanese governments perpetuated negative perceptions against Muslim nationals. The Muslim north of the country had been largely excluded from political power, held by a majority Christian political elite in Bangui. Over the years, the north experienced little government investment in terms of health care, education and economic infrastructure. This neglect created a sense of legitimate grievance and resentment in the Muslim north that contributed to the conflict. This coupled with the fact that the nationality of the people of Muslim extraction in CAR is often questioned by non-Muslims and this is seen in the fact that the state is always reluctant to recognize Muslim organizations. The fact that the Anti-balaka militia was Christian dominated and the Seleka Muslim dominated and the fact that the Anti-Balaka demonstrated a pattern of deliberately targeting Muslims was an indication that the CAR conflict had religious undertones at its roots.

It can therefore be adduced that the conflict in the CAR was multifaceted as no single factor could be seen to be solely responsible for the conflict. It was therefore the outcome or a combination of accumulated grievances that spans from the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial epochs in the history of the CAR. The outcome of this conflict was that the population became dispersed as many migrated to neighboring countries such as Cameroon, Chad, Gabon, Congo among others in search of peace and a means of livelihood. A majority of these migrants found themselves in various parts of Cameroon where they lived in refugee camps or amongst Cameroonians in different towns and cities. It therefore became germane to study the coping mechanisms of these CAR migrants in Cameroon.

The CAR Settlers in Cameroon

The conflict in the Central African Republic took its toll on the country and its people in various dimensions. The impact of this protracted conflict even went beyond the territorial confines of the CAR as neighboring countries also felt its effects. The events related to the conflict caused severe and unprecedented humanitarian and human rights crisis in the

country. The crisis left millions of people in need of humanitarian assistance. The state became unable to protect its civilians from systematic targeting or prevent human rights abuses. These abuses were committed by all parties to the conflict, including extra-judicial killings, enforced disappearance, arbitrary arrest and detention, torture, sexual violence against women and children, rape, recruitment and use of children as soldiers and attacks on civilians. This cycle of violence and abuse made many civilians to migrate to neighboring countries where they sought refugee status and were given a place to stay as well as protection and assistance by the host country as well as from international humanitarian groups.

Cameroon served as a safe- haven for many refugees escaping the conflict from the CAR due to the long and somewhat porous border between the two countries. The conflict produced thousands of refugees that sought refuge in Cameroon in such camps found in Garoua-Boulai, Kette, Mbile, Timangolo, Kenzou, Douala, Yaoundé, Borgop, among others. These refugees while in Cameroon faced the problem of adaptation, cultural shock as well as recurrent trauma based on their varied experiences during the crisis. Those that were integrated in various communities in Cameroon were not given full rights as their movement in the country was in most cases, restricted only to the localities where they found themselves. Those intending to move out to other areas within the host communities were subjected to strict immigration procedures.

The CAR refugees in Cameroon are concentrated in the East, Adamawa and North regions with a significant presence in the East region since it is proximate to the CAR and due to the migratory patterns of the Mbororo that are in both countries. A majority of CAR refugees are scattered in over seventy settlements along the border in the East and Adamawa regions often integrated into host villages. While most of them live in host communities, others live in designated camps and yet others in urban areas as Yaoundé and Douala.

According to 2019 statistics, there were about 275,835 Central Africa refugees in Cameroon and more were to come in after due to the conflict and the decline in the humanitarian conditions for the people. This figure had risen to 431 530 in 2025. In addition to the social ills that accompanied the hosting of these refugees, they also posed an economic and security threat to the country as some of them were ex combatants that

extended their conflict into Cameroon or even radicalized Cameroonians nationals. This explains why Cameroon became involved in peace initiatives so as to resolve the conflict. This was especially because the refugees could only be repatriated after the conflict had been convincingly resolved.

Based on these concerns, Cameroon became actively involved in the CAR conflict. She became one of the main external protagonist with the aim of realizing her own interest of a peaceful region that could ensure the smooth running of economic activities that benefit her. This national interest that favored peace also coincided with the interest of the sub regional, regional and international organizations that Cameroon is a member and informed her contribution towards the resolution of the conflict through The Economic and Monetary Union of Central African States (CEMAC), The Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) The African Union (AU) and the United Nations Organization (UNO).

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) worked closely with wide range of partners including key government ministries and decentralized entities, UN agencies, NGOs, Civil Society, the Refugee community, donors, private sector and other humanitarian and development actors to respond to the most pressing needs of refugees and other displaced persons across the country.

Challenges Faced by the CAR Refugees in Cameroon

The culture of the host communities in Cameroon such as Borgop, Garoua-Bulai, Mbile amongst others differed from those of the migrants. Though some were Mbororo and could easily coalesce with the Mbororos of Cameroon, some difficulties persisted in adapting to the values and lifestyles of the host communities. These cultural differences between the migrants and the host communities in Cameroon at times led to resistance in accommodating the migrants. Intolerance and cultural differences between the host communities and the refugees triggered tensions at times. Since most of the refugees were grazers, cases of farmer-grazer problems emerged. Cultural diversity therefore constituted one of the challenges towards the proper and easy integration of CAR refugees in Cameroon.

The refugees in Cameroon also faced the problem of employment opportunities. As foreigners in Cameroon, it was difficult for them to have access to white collar jobs. This explains why many of them got involved in agriculture as well as cattle rearing, trading tailoring among others. Even those that settled in urban areas like Yaoundé and Douala faced difficulties in acquiring jobs as they were not employed in the formal sector. This was because they did not have the required education or training for such employment. This lack of employment opportunities resulted in increased promiscuity in the host communities as desperate girls and women easily fell prey to unscrupulous men in order to have a means of livelihood. In addition to this, some of the cattle herders and those involved in agriculture also faced the problem of land for both grazing and farming. Though they acquired land and some even got married to the indigenes, this was not always enough as there were often complaints from the host communities that the refugees were reducing the stock of land available to them. While most of the CAR refugees have access to land in Cameroon, the central government left it up to villages to decide how land is shared and how much is shared. In some cases, the village chief assigns a plot of public land for the refugees to farm and in some cases, individuals may rent the land.

They also faced the challenge of access to health care facilities. Crowded and inadequate living conditions may lead to infectious diseases outbreaks such as respiratory and gastrointestinal illness and skin disease. The CAR refugees especially those in the camps faced this situation and so were always in dire need of healthcare. However, the UNHCR and its partners cooperated with the government of Cameroon to provide the health needs of the refugees. The refugee law, grants them access to same education and health facilities available to the host communities in Cameroon. Unfortunately, the accessibility of services in the East and Adamawa regions was poor as the available Health Centers were far below national standards. In many villages, there were no health centers and people had to travel far distances to access health care. Wherever there was a health center, it was usually insufficient to handle the pressure from the population. The areas where the refugees lived also suffered from lack of portable water and sanitation facilities despite the fact the water points and latrines were added as the numbers increased. All these health challenges affected the proper integration of the CAR refugees in Cameroon.

The CAR refugees like other migrants suffered prolonged periods of loneliness before forming meaningful relationships within the host communities. Though adaptation was easier for the Mbororo migrants because of cultural similarities with the host communities, it was not the case with refugees of other ethnic groups. Loneliness can be compounded by cases of rejection, discrimination, isolation, stereotyping and micro aggression in their new communities. The refugees found it difficult to communicate regularly with their families and associates back in the CAR due to high communication costs. This loneliness coupled with other problems at times resulted in depression and death. With time, the refugees experienced loss of identity, wealth, social status, family bonds, language, and freedom amongst others.

Despite these challenges, the CAR refugees in Cameroon were able to develop coping strategies and have so far adapted and integrated within their host communities. This was facilitated by their docile nature as well as the assistance given to them by the Cameroon government, the indigenes as well as the UNHCR and other UN agencies and International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOS).

Resilience Strategies of the CAR Refugees in Cameroon

The paper contends that social integration is consensual and that rational beings are capable of achieving integration with time and interaction. Refugees and host communities need to be in agreement over commons such as land, infrastructures and economic activities. The CAR refugees in Cameroon therefore exhibited resilience through their activities in Cameroon which made it possible for them to co-habit peacefully with the host communities and to surmount the challenges they experienced in their early years in Cameroon. Such resilience strategies included getting involved in income generating activities, inter-marriages, cultural adaptations, acquiring land peacefully for economic activities among others. This section of the paper examines the resilience or coping strategies of the CAR refugees in Cameroon.

The refugees from the CAR in various host communities in Cameroon learnt to get involved in farming and this went a long way to solve the problems of food shortage among them. As such, food aid that came in from donor agencies only went to the most vulnerable such as widows, the elderly and the handicapped. Majority of the refugees

became involved in farming and other income generating activities that have so far guaranteed food self-sufficiency to them. The refugees that have settled in and around established villages have so far adapted in such a way that they have attained almost the same living standards with the indigenes.

The CAR refugees are given access to land for grazing, housing and farming. The government of Cameroon left it on the villagers to decide how land acquired and how much is given to the refugees. In some areas, the chiefs gave out public lands for the refugees to farm or graze. Some got the land either by buying or renting from individuals and chiefs. Since their main activity was pastoral, the CAR refugees had to learn agricultural practices. They did it so well that most of them are self-sufficient in food. The acquisition of land by these refugees however generated conflict with the host communities in some areas as there was pressure on land. These problems were handled amicably by the chiefs and the migrants continued to live in harmony with their host communities.

The CAR settlers integrated themselves to the level where they had access to credit. This access to credit facilities had the potential to strengthen self-reliance. Through these facilities, the settlers started their own businesses or purchased greater quantities and varieties of seed, fertilizer and ultimately modern farm equipment. Through these credit facilities opened to them, the refugees could pay for the education of their children and also for healthcare which led to additional economic opportunities and greater self-reliance. All these made them comfortable and so coped easily with their status as refugees in Cameroon.

Some got access to employment opportunities and other forms of livelihoods. In addition to farming and cattle rearing, some got involved in small scale economic activities as animal husbandry, tailoring or trading. Starting a business was difficult as it required formal registrations and these could be very long and complicated for non-citizens. To bypass this, the refugees combined efforts with friends and willing associates who already had registered businesses and in that way, they got involved in the business sector. This made it possible for some of them to cope as businessmen and women in their host communities.

The CAR refugees in Cameroon were able to cope easily because of the welcoming attitude of the host communities in which they found themselves. They lived peacefully with the Cameroonians. They were given land to graze and farm and were able to send their children to school. This peaceful coexistence between them and the host communities enabled them to cope easily.

Socially, most of the refugees got access to decent accommodation, education and healthcare. All these made them to feel at home in Cameroon. The refugees have been integrated in such a way that they live in houses similar to those of Cameroonians and in the same neighborhoods. Also, there is no barrier to social interaction between the refugees and the indigenes. The two groups socialized at all levels including at school and community activities and there are no religious conflicts. The level of their interaction extends to marriage. Intermarriages was well accepted among both the refugees and Cameroonians. This social interaction and acceptance account for the resilience of the refugees in Cameroon. These refugees are also free to move from one village of Cameroon to the other as most of them were not confined to camps.

The refugees were also accepted in their host communities to the extent that they collaborated in the management of the villages. Refugees participated in the management of village water, health and school projects. This village acceptance and integration of refugees of the CAR in Cameroon coincides with the welcoming attitude of the government of Cameroon to refugees from the various African countries. This receptive policies of the Cameroon government and her cooperation with the UNHCR and other bodies that cater for refugees made the coping strategy easy for CAR settlers.

Conclusion

The CAR refugees entered Cameroon in their numbers during the long civil war in that country. These refugees settled either in camps as was the case in Borgop, Mbile, Garoua-Bulai or alongside other host communities. Some however, settled in urban areas such as Douala and Yaoundé. Those that settled amongst host communities were able to acquire land both for grazing and agricultural as well as for settlement. They also had access to education and health facilities. Those in the camps were able to learn trades such as tailoring and building among others and were assisted by aid and provision of basic

amenities from the UNHCR, the Cameroon government and other international donors and NGOs. It is therefore the argument of this paper that despite the difficulties that the refugees encountered on their arrival in Cameroon, these migrants and the indigenous people of Cameroon impacted on each other through social and economic integration as well as other resilience factors. This easy social integration was because most of the migrants were Mbororo pastoralists that had cultural similarities with the Mbororos of Cameroon. This made them easily acceptable to the people and made it easier for them to cope with their status of migrants or refugees in Cameroon.

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