

Stopping Bloodshed in the Central African Republic Amid Ghosts of Genocide

By SOMINI SENGUPTA, New York Times

Published: December 9, 2013

UNITED NATIONS — The word genocide sends shivers down the spines of United Nations diplomats, resurrecting the memory of the world body's failure to stem massacres in Rwanda nearly 20 years ago and, before that, in Bosnia.

Lately, in describing the carnage in the Central African Republic, diplomats have been swallowing that word even as it seems to be on the tip of their tongues. They are choosing other words. "Mass violence," was Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's choice.

"History has taught us the worst may happen," is how the French ambassador, Gérard Araud, referred to it.

"There have been atrocities committed already," said Samantha Power, the American ambassador.

What vexes the world body now is how to prevent another catastrophe in the battered Central African Republic — and in turn how to shield itself from future reproach. That reckoning comes as Western militaries are tied up on other battlefields, and crises elsewhere have made new demands on United Nations peacekeepers and the rich countries that finance them.

A resolution passed last week by the Security Council tries to strike a balance. It strengthens an intervention force of up to 6,000 African troops, to be aided by 1,600 French soldiers.

The United States will provide transport aircraft to move international forces from Burundi to the Central African Republic "to prevent the further spread of sectarian violence," said Carl Woog, a Pentagon spokesman. American troops will not fight, officials said.

But it is still a gamble: What if the newly fortified African soldiers, some of whom lack even body armor, continue to be overwhelmed by the Kalashnikov-wielding fighters, as they have in recent weeks?

Since the passage of the resolution on Thursday, shootouts between the mostly Muslim rebel fighters who overthrew the government this year and rival Christian militias have left more than 400 dead, according to the local Red Cross. The aid agency Doctors Without Borders on Monday confirmed executions at a hospital in the capital, Bangui. Hundreds of civilians had begun crossing a river into the Democratic Republic of Congo, according to the United Nations. On Monday, French soldiers briefly traded fire with the militias they are trying to disarm, Reuters reported.

A Human Rights Watch researcher found one predominantly Muslim town deserted and partly burned, its residents huddled at a makeshift camp. The group has urged the Security Council to fortify the African troops with better equipment and logistics, or to deploy a formal United Nations peacekeeping force better equipped to protect civilians over the long term.

"If the post Rwanda and Bosnia 'never again' means anything, the U.N. Security Council needs to go all in to halt the spiraling killing in the Central African Republic," said the United Nations director of Human Rights Watch, Philippe Boloipon. "This is a moment of truth."

That will not be easy, said Bruce Jones, a former United Nations official now at New York University. For one thing, only Britain, France and the United States have the equipment and soldiers to be able to deploy rapidly to such a vast, landlocked country. And they all face constraints, as Mr. Jones put it.

“The U.K. defense forces have been badly stretched by Afghanistan, and the U.S. will be reluctant to deploy to a country where its troops don’t speak the language and it has virtually no presence,” Mr. Jones said. “The combination of French deployments and the rapid buildup of a regional operation is probably the least bad option now. Let’s just hope it’s not too little too late.”

The Central African Republic, with a population of 4.6 million, has been marred by coups, rebellions and lawlessness for many years. This year, the situation took a sharp turn for the worse when a rebel group known as Seleka, or “alliance,” ousted President François Bozizé. Since then, the mostly Muslim Seleka fighters have clashed with Christian militias. No one has come up with a reliable death toll.

Western diplomats say they know there is no guarantee that the African troops will be able to restore law and order, and the resolution passed Thursday instructs the secretary general’s office to make contingency plans to deploy a larger peacekeeping force if necessary. What exactly would make that necessary remained unclear.

The resolution asks rich nations to contribute to the African troops; so far the European Union has contributed \$50 million and the United States \$40 million. A larger peacekeeping operation would cost much more. Peacekeeping worldwide already costs more than \$7.5 billion, with nearly 100,000 uniformed personnel deployed around the globe.

Publicly, diplomats insist that the resolution represents the most efficient way to intervene. “It’s going to make a difference in the immediate future,” Mr. Araud, the French ambassador, told reporters after the Security Council vote.

Ms. Power described it as “the most immediate vehicle” to protect civilians. Her office said Sunday that she had called the country’s transitional president on the phone, urging him to arrest those who had committed atrocities and “use his influence to reduce interreligious tensions.”

The United States has not had an embassy in the country for years. Russia and China, the other major powers on the Security Council, have been virtually silent on the crisis unfolding there.

Clearly, United Nations officials have been haunted by the sectarian tenor of the conflict. In a briefing to the Council, the deputy secretary general, Jan Eliasson, called it “a vicious cycle that could very easily turn into mass atrocities.”

Let no one say later that the world was not warned, he went on to tell reporters. “It is not as much a problem of early warning — we have had this warning for a long time,” Mr. Eliasson said. “The question now is timely response.”

Some senior United Nations officials have uttered the G word. John Ging, director of operations for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, told CNN last month that “we see the seeds of a genocide here” unless the world quickly stops it.

In the meantime, Muslims and Christians have been sent huddling into mosques and churches to save themselves from vigilantes.

Thom Shanker contributed reporting from Doha, Qatar.

A version of this article appears in print on December 10, 2013, on page A6 of the New York edition with the headline: Halting Bloodshed Amid Ghosts of Rwanda and Bosnia.