

Thirteen dead in Central African Republic gunbattle
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BANGUI - Clashes between fighters who seized power in Central African Republic last month and youths loyal to the ousted former president has killed at least 13 people and left dozens wounded, medical sources said on Monday.

The fighting on Sunday was the heaviest in the capital Bangui since a grouping of five rebel movements known as Seleka seized the city on March 24, forcing President Francois Bozize to flee to neighboring Cameroon.

"Following yesterday's fighting, we've recorded 13 dead by gunshot ... and 52 wounded," said Romain Guitinzia, director of the hospital that received victims of the violence.

A previous provisional death toll had listed seven people killed, including three who died when a shell struck their church. The new figures were confirmed by the local Red Cross.

Michel Djotodia, who led the rapid rebel advance across the mineral-rich former French colony, said his fighters came under fire from the neighborhood's residents on Sunday and accused Bozize of arming them.

"Bozize prepared a civil war and gave the youth weapons of war and machetes," he said in an address on state television late on Sunday. "Since we took power, this armed neighborhood of Boy-Rabe has always opposed the presence of our men. Several Seleka elements have been killed in this neighborhood."

A senior Seleka officer said that more than 50 people were arrested following the violence and large quantities of weapons were recovered from the neighborhood.

International aid organizations have said that uncontrolled armed groups including members of the Seleka movement continue to loot, spread chaos and recruit children into their ranks.

"We are extremely concerned by the situation in the Central African Republic," French foreign ministry spokesman Philippe Lalliot said on Monday. "The ongoing violence against the population is unacceptable. It's urgent that the authorities control Bangui and ensure public order and security."

Djotodia, who drew international condemnation and sanctions after declaring himself president last month, was chosen by a transitional council on Saturday to lead the impoverished country to elections.

Under the transitional roadmap, he will serve as Central African Republic's head of state but not be eligible to run for the presidency in the polls due to take place within 18 months. Seleka launched its insurgency in early December, accusing Bozize of reneging on a 2007 peace deal.