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Central African Republic

Central African Republic: looting as retribution

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Russian mercenaries and Rwandan soldiers are protecting the authoritarian regime in the Central African Republic (CAR). In return, they lay their hands on the country's riches. Yesterday, at the gates of Bangui, the capital of the CAR, the various armed groups operating in the country were partly defeated by the combined action of Wagner's troops, the UN mission, Minusca, and Rwandan special forces.

Scorched earth policy

This counter-offensive extended to the country's main towns, but was accompanied by widespread violence against civilians perpetrated by Wagner's mercenaries. Entire villages were razed to the ground and the Russian soldiers claimed more victims than all the armed rebel groups put together.

The challenge for Wagner is not just to preserve the power of the President of the Republic, Faustin-Archange Touadéra, but to get his hands on the diamond and gold mines previously exploited by the armed militias. Although the militias have been weakened, they are still present in the country's rural areas.

Although the Russian authorities regained control of Wagner's activities in the CAR following the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin, the company's founder, the mercenaries retain a large degree of autonomy and continue to expand their business by trying to diversify into log exports and brewing.

But the Russians are no longer alone and must now rely on the Rwandans. For the moment, everyone is respecting a *modus vivendi*.

Interested aid

The Rwandan contingent represents 20% of the 14,000 soldiers of the Minusca led by Valentine Rugwabiza, a Rwandan businesswoman and diplomat. Other Rwandans head up local UN agencies such as the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Food Programme (WFP), as well as structures such as the World Bank. At the same time, almost 850 special forces soldiers reporting directly to the Rwandan government have been deployed.

While the Rwandan forces have a much better reputation among the civilian population than Wagner's mercenaries, they are also widely used to secure the economic activities of the mining companies owned by the Crystal Ventures holding company, which is linked to the RPF, Paul Kagamé's ruling party. These mines exploit rare earths, in particular tantalum used in electronics and niobium to produce steel alloys. In addition to the numerous companies created and benefiting from tax exemptions, the grabbing of arable land - more than 40,000 hectares where large Rwandan farms have been set up - has been denounced by the opposition.

Whether Russian or Rwandan, these armed forces from undemocratic countries are helping to strengthen Touadéra's authoritarian power. They are secure in the knowledge that the constitutional referendum abolishing term limits has been passed. As a reward, they plunder the country's natural resources with complete impunity.

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