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Central African Republic: The Difficulties of a Third World Country

There was once a time when Belgium, Great Britain, Germany, and France fought over the lands of Equatorial Africa. After more than two decades of war, France won, naming the area the French Congo. To avoid paying debt, France leased out some of the land to the European Colonies. The areas of land were not watched over and had few controls, leaving the Europeans to do as they pleased as long as they paid rent. Due to the lack of surveillance, the people of Africa were forced into slavery. Men and women alike gathered wild rubber, hunted for ivory and animal skins, and worked on plantations. All environments were filled with diseases, many of which were untreatable. Africans were so busy doing as they were told that they had no time to work on their farms, causing food shortages and famine. Riots started breaking out all over the country. One of the most famous is the Kongo-wara Rebellion. It started in 1928 and lasted until 1931, when their leaders were imprisoned and executed. Supporters were relocated to supervised villages where they stayed until the Mouvement pour l'Évolution Sociale de l'Afrique Noire (MESAN) gained control in 1957. In English, MESAN translates to the Social Evolution Movement of Black Africa. This movement was founded by Boganda, a Roman Catholic priest who left his church. Boganda wanted the French territories of Chad, Gabon, Congo, and Ubangi-shari to form a single nation, but they all declined. He was forced to sign a constitution created by the French. David Dacko took over in 1959 when Boganda died. Under his rule, the Ubangi-Shari region was renamed the Central African Republic. The first thing he did in office was give government positions to his followers with an increase of pay. This single act drained the national budget, creating the start of the nation's debt. The next year on August 13, Africa won its independence. Dacko still allowed the French to assist them with trading, defense, and foreign relations until he felt confident enough to take over completely. While he helped the people gain independence, his ruling was unsuccessful. In the 1962 elections, MESAN was the only legal party eligible for election, so Dacko ran unopposed. The people remained under his rule until 1965 when an army commander, Jean-Bédél Bokassa, replaced him. Bokassa proved to be just as inadequate a leader as Dacko. In 1972, he declared himself eternal president. Five years later he was crowned as emperor. Coming out of debt was even harder under his rule because he kept most of the diamonds from their deposits for himself. France realized their mistake and restored Dacko to power in 1979. Citizens hadn't forgotten him, though, and Dacko was forced to rely upon French troops to keep himself in power. He reigned like this until 1981 when Andre Kolingba removed Dacko from his position. Kolingba was too controlling and unfair to his people, even after creating a new constitution. The people became completely intolerant in 1991. After two years of riots, Kolingba finally gave in and set up an election date. Democrat Ange-Félix Patassé was elected president. While he did his best to help the people, there was no way to fix the damage that had already been done. This complicated history has created today's problems of the Central African Republic. One of these problems is the shortage of provisions. Few rivers run through the center of Africa, creating scarce amounts of water. The small number of rivers that are present face desertification because of the long, dry summers. Pollution has also contaminated many of the main water sources and quickened the spread of diseases. All of these problems have led to death and overcrowding in areas with water. Soil is rich, but the lack of progress stops the people from growing crops productively.

The Central African Republic is a small country located in the heart of Africa, just above the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Central Intelligence Agency World Fact Book). While it shows much potential for agriculture, its long and difficult past has slowed its development in many aspects, making it the sixth poorest country in the world (Mbacke). Slightly larger than France, it is covered with 623,000 square kilometers of monotonous plateaus (Central Intelligence Agency World Fact Book). Bangui, the capital,

is home to a large majority of the four million people who populate the Central African Republic. Despite this, three-fifths of the population live in rural conditions, leaving roughly forty percent to live in urban areas (Encyclopedia Britannica). Less than forty percent of its residents are under the age of 15 (Encyclopedia Britannica). Unlike North America, the Central African Republic only has two seasons: dry and wet (Central Intelligence Agency World Fact Book). During the wet season, August through September, the upper Ubangi region is likely to get 71 inches of precipitation annually. The Kerre Mountains only get 59 inches. Precipitation usually takes the form of monsoons. October through March constitutes the dry season. Instead of monsoons, places are likely to get sandstorms and dust storms. Temperatures during this season can get as hot as 104°F (Encyclopedia Britannica).

Family life is quite simple in this area. Because it is underdeveloped, families still live in villages with poor housing conditions. Only 5% of families have permanent living quarters (World Mark Encyclopedia of Nations). Most homes are made out of mud-brick or wattle and daub (Encyclopedia Britannica). People who live next to a forest will make a home out of flexible branches and broad leaves. Most homes are made out of materials like these, but lumber companies have often given leftover wood to their workers as pay (Encyclopedia Britannica). Building the houses is left to the males. They are also in charge of hunting, trapping, and fishing. In harsh conditions, the wives will fish but are mainly left to gather, produce, conserve, distribute, and prepare the food any other time of the year (Encyclopedia Britannica).

Education is difficult to obtain in the Central African Republic. Each family will have anywhere from three to seven children. Until they turn six, they are left to help their mothers clean the house and prepare the food. After this they are eligible for school. Education is not cheap, however, and is often difficult to achieve. Because of this, only 50% of the population is literate. Those who can afford it will send their sons to school for approximately eight years, but their daughters will only go until they are 11 years old (Central Intelligence Agency World Fact Book). For every teacher there are seventy-seven students (Encyclopedia). Only the best students and those with political connections will further their education by going to France (Encyclopedia Britannica). All other citizens in the middle and lower classes are left to make their livings on family farms.

Farming is an extremely important aspect of these citizens' lives. Not only is it their main source of food, but it is also important in foreign exchange. The country director of Merlin, Bruns Fugah, said, "If you drop a seed anywhere in this country, food will grow," (Merlin USA). The residents will not allow soil testing, however. Small family farms will usually produce corn, millet, sorghum, cassava, rice, squash, and peanuts (Encyclopedia Britannica). While the others are important, cassava is probably one of the most beneficial crops (Hand). Not only are Cassava plants low maintenance and able to grow in poor soil, but the roots are still edible after being left in the ground for two or three years. They are often kept for emergency purposes. In some cases they are ground into flour or used in medicinal recipes (Hand). Despite this, large-scale business farms are more likely to grow cotton and coffee beans that have been genetically engineered as cash crops. Cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, and poultry have been raised as well. River fish and pond-raised tilapia are sold or traded at the market for other foods and products (Encyclopedia Britannica).

Trading is important for their income. Natural gold and diamond deposits and a few uranium reserves are scattered throughout the Central African Republic (Merlin USA). Diamonds make up nearly half of the total export earning (Encyclopedia Britannica). Their lush vegetation and thick forests supply enough wood for timber exports to be a helpful asset in foreign exchange (Merlin USA). Manufacturing isn't huge, but it does supply some cash flow. Sawmills, breweries, and textiles make up a large majority of factories. Deforestation is starting to bring down the number of sawmills and lumber mills available. Imported goods include petroleum products, machinery, electrical equipment, vehicles, chemicals, and pharmaceuticals (Central Intelligence Agency World Fact Book). Petroleum itself isn't needed as much for power as in the United States. Waterfalls provide hydroelectric power (Encyclopedia Britannica).

Bangui has two hydroelectric generators and one thermal plant, but the dams produce 80% of the country's electricity (World Mark Encyclopedia of Nations). Five-sevenths of their international trade is done by river because of their lack of development (Encyclopedia Britannica).

If it weren't for their lack of government, the Central African Republic would be an extremely prosperous country. If they were prosperous, they wouldn't be as hungry. In the past, tens of thousands of people were forced to flee from their homes and live in desperate conditions (Mbacke). The role of the government is to do everything possible to make the people feel secure. Past rulers have done a terrible job at making sure this happen. Now, thick forests provide perfect terrain for highway bandits, which increases the insecurity of the people. Without a good government, the insecurity will continue to expand and hinder the country's development. This failure to develop has brought up more problems (Merlin USA). One of these problems has been uprisings which has put the country in a deep crisis (Mbacke). Another has been overpopulation. The people are so insecure about their children's survival rate that they have more kids than needed to make up for any that are lost (Danaher). Ninety-six percent of the arable land is uncultivated, but citizens prefer to live near the capital (Merlin USA). There has been no forced settlement to the eastern and northeastern parts of central Africa which prolongs the population's suffering (Encyclopedia Britannica). The unwillingness to move suggests that coercive measures must be taken. Citizens have started riots and formed dangerous rebel groups to encourage change in the government. A leader of one of these groups took over as president on March 24 this year (VOA news). He claims that the security has been returned, but thefts, disappearances, and other alleged abuses against the citizens by armed groups continue to be reported (Look). This new president, Michel Djotodia, specifically states that his first priority will be to deal with the worsening security across the nation, but these uncontrolled armed groups may delay this process (Look).

The only form of health care available is located in Bangui (Encyclopedia Britannica). This is one reason so many people reside close to the capital. For every 3000 people there is only one doctor (Merlin USA). Many of them work for charity organizations and were sent to help with the increasing cases of malaria, leprosy, tuberculosis, sleeping sickness and STDs (Encyclopedia Britannica). Some doctors haven't been paid in over a year. Only a small group are granted welfare benefits such as unemployment, maternity benefits, child-care allowances, and social security. People with these forms of welfare are government and private-sector employees (Encyclopedia Britannica). Health care like this is not available to the general public.

The main way to solve all the Central African Republic's problems is to get rid of their insecurity. This can be done in a few ways. The main way is through water and sanitation. In 2000, only 60% of the population had access to safe drinking water (Merlin USA). Supplying more sources of water (wells, man-made river, etc.) to uninhabited areas would end the need to crowd the capital. With a well or river close by, women will be able to gather the needed water without walking a great distance from their home. This will also help families feel more secure about their environment, thereby helping the country expand and develop. Once the population has pervaded the country, families will be able to grow food on new, unused soil. An increase of food production will be inevitable.

Creating more sanitary conditions will also help the people. Keeping the food and water clean will decrease the risk of food related illnesses as well as the need for hospitals. Placing modern day hospitals or mobile clinics sporadically around the Central African Republic could dilute the desire to swamp the capital. Diseases will be slower to spread because of the distance between homes and because of the increased hospitals. Children under the age of five will have a better chance at surviving the harsh conditions, and parents will not feel the need to have as many offspring.

Citizens of the Central African Republic could help solve these problems. If the inhabitants were willing to spread themselves throughout the country into the less populated areas, land use would be more

effective. Family farms would be bigger and capable of producing more necessary crops. The population would also have more room to grow and expand. By helping create water sources they would have a larger selection of places to live and no one would have to worry about being too far from water in emergencies. Other groups have tried to help them since their history has kept them from helping themselves.

With Africa being the poorest continent in the world, there are many groups that have tried to help them. The International Committee of the Red Cross is one of the more varied groups. While most people only think of the Red Cross as helping with HIV and AID prevention, their services reach much farther. Their mission has always been to “relieve the suffering of those impacted by war, natural disaster, and disease by delivering vital healthcare services that focus on training” (Vadlamudi). This has caused them to help with everything from maternal and child health care to gender-based violence prevention and response. Along with these, they strive to assist with child protection, nutrition services, and health education. Members of the Red Cross have also created activities that promote hygiene for children as well as adults (Vadlamudi). Recent activity in the Central African Republic has caused an increase in aid, especially for the European Union who has spent more than \$15 million in emergency funds this year (VOA news). The unrest and violence has displaced more than 200,000 people (VOA news). Even though the number of beneficiaries in the Red Cross increased from forty-thousand to one hundred thousand in four months in 2007, only twenty-thousand African citizens were provided with help by August that same year (Mbacke). Today, the Red Cross has more than 13 million active members, but it is unsure if that will be enough to get Africa on its feet.

As one can see the Central African Republic has much room to develop. Life is simple and the people are uneducated. Houses are poorly built leading to constant changes of homes and places of shelter. Factories are not as numerous as they are in America because their mining exports have kept them financially stable. Diamond and gold deposits can be found throughout this country along with uranium reserves and timber exports. These make up more than 75% of the country’s income. Iron ore, copper, and manganese are mined in much smaller amounts. When these resources run out, the people of CAR will be forced to turn to farming. Land in this country is rich with minerals necessary to a plant’s needs, but these people have no modern irrigation systems and minimal knowledge of large-scale farming. The insecurity of the people has kept it this way. Increasing the availability of water and stressing the importance of sanitation would help move the country along. Getting clean water to families who live miles from an unpolluted source would grant them the ability to grow copious provisions. Excess food can be shipped to other countries for cash or traded in markets for other necessary household items. It could also be stored for emergency situations and years of low production. With help from outside authorities they have improved in many aspects already. Sterilized water sources are still difficult to reach but continue to escalate in numbers and availability. Bangui has continued to become overpopulated in the last few years because of its water sources and modernized health care systems. Volunteers are stopping this growth by creating hospitals in less populated areas. These hospitals will hopefully attract citizens who aren’t getting help in crowded areas. Cities with fewer residents will grow, allowing the population to skyrocket without worry. Farms will be greater and more prosperous, allowing fathers to sustain a larger family. With bigger farms and closer water supplies, parents will not feel the need to have as many children. The population will grow more slowly, allowing the country more time to deal with other problems. A variety of people and organizations are doing everything they can to help the Central African Republic, but help is still needed. If America continues to help them prosper, they might be generous in the future and help us get out of our debt, or provide us with materials we need at lower prices. In just a few more years, CAR will be eligible to thrive on its own land with no help from others.

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