

Who are Seleka?

By **Jason Warner**, Special to CNN

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No sooner had the U.N Security Council **approved an intervention in Mali** than a potential coup cropped up across the African continent in the landlocked and impoverished country of the Central African Republic (CAR). Last December, a group of rebels operating under the banner of Seleka launched a lightning offensive, marching across the country and threatening to overthrow the regime of President François Bozizé for allegedly failing to follow through on promises he made to them during peace accords signed in 2007.

Meaning “coalition” in Sango – one of two official national languages in the CAR – the Seleka insurgency is an alliance of an estimated 1,000 to 3,000 former rebels. In the face of virtually no opposition from the disorganized and poorly trained CAR army, Seleka tore towards the capital of Bangui, occupying numerous towns on its way. For weeks after, it camped outside of the capital threatening an invasion.

But it is not exactly clear who makes up Seleka’s membership. Officially, Seleka is the title given to the broader alliance of smaller groups – some a decade old, others having emerged just months ago – that have qualms with Bozizé’s government. Indeed, Seleka is thought to have come into existence only last September, making its coalition official last month when three of the country’s rebel groups – The Patriots’ Convention for Justice and Peace (CPJP), The Union of Democratic Forces for Unity (UFDR), and The Democratic Front of Central African People (FDPC) – allied themselves in opposition to the Bozizé regime.

To these previously known groups, two newer outfits have reportedly joined forces: The Patriotic Convention for the Salvation of Kodro (“kodro” means “country” in Sango) and the Alliance for Renaissance and Reorganization. Unofficially, however, observers believe that a much more diverse cast of characters is at Seleka’s core. Government officials from Bangui have accused Seleka of harboring “foreign provocateurs” greedy for the country’s vast mineral wealth, and there are suspicions that nationals from Chad, Nigeria, and Sudan also make up Seleka’s ranks. Others have noted that rather than being a simple revolt by CAR’s civil society, money to pay Seleka’s soldiers may originate from the same sources that funded the Malian, Libyan, and Tunisian revolts: amongst others, this would imply Chad and possibly al Qaeda.

How effective is this force? Again, analysts are split.

Some are impressed. **As one commentator from the CAR remarked:** “The Seleka combatants are more motivated, and, at this point, more disciplined than their adversaries [the CAR army] who fight in retreat, relinquishing their positions in the face of a dazzling advance by the enemy.” Researcher **Roland Marchal** asserts that Seleka’s “decorous behavior” towards citizens in overtaken towns suggests that the group indeed has “a true chain of command, and, without a doubt, a strategy.”

But others have questioned whether Seleka has a coherent political agenda. In an oft-cited op-ed, CAR expatriate **Alain Lamessi has written** that Seleka “has no concept or structure of a political program, no clear or coherent ideology, no precise demands,” and that, “in its current form, Seleka is not and cannot be considered a credible alternative to the Bozizé regime.” A **French diplomat**, meanwhile, has reportedly dismissed the group as comprising “a spokesman seeking personal revenge against Bozizé, greedy foreign soldiers seeking pillaging concessions who don’t even speak the national language, and some mid-level ‘political-military’ personnel.” Bozizé is for his part used to having a tenuous grip on power. Having served in the CAR army under the reign of the country’s monarchical President Jean-Bédél Bokassa in the 1970s, Bozizé came to power in 2003 after launching a rebellion with Chadian assistance and capturing the government while then-President Ange Félix-Patassé was outside of the country. Bozizé has weathered waves of opposition since then.

In addition to facing widespread accusations of fraud in presidential election wins in 2005 and 2011, Bozizé’s position has been threatened by subnational insurgencies.

Shortly after his ascension to the presidency, in 2004, a civil conflict broke out in the country that has come to be known as the Central African Bush War. Under the leadership of Michel Djotodia, and working under the banner of the Union of Democratic Forces for Unity (UFDR), was a coalition of various rebel groups. Ultimately, neighboring Chad helped to broker a deal between the CAR government and the UFDR.

At the center of Seleka’s contemporary anti-government agenda is Bozizé’s alleged failure to follow through on the terms of the 2007 ceasefire of the Central African Bushwar, also known as the Global Peace Accord. Seleka did agree on January 11 to **form a unity government** with Bozizé to end the month-long standoff, but peace is far from assured, and Seleka warned that it would resume fighting if the terms of the ceasefire were not fully fulfilled.

As Seleka spokesman Eric Massi ominously told a reporter: “We will judge Mr. Bozizé's sincerity in the coming days.” With a reputation for shifting positions, Bozizé's next moves are unclear – as is the future of the ceasefire.