

Patasse Reveals Presidency Bid ^[1]

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But some believe ex-CAR leader could provoke renewed instability if he were to contest 2010 poll.

The former head of state of the Central African Republic, CAR, Ange-Felix Patasse, has told IWPR he will take part in presidential elections there next year, but analysts warn such a move runs the risk of tipping the fragile country into another crisis.

Patasse, who was president from 1993 to 2003, has been in exile in Togo since being ousted by current president Francois Bozize in a bloody overthrow in which tens of thousands of civilians were killed. The International Criminal Court, ICC, has linked him to war crimes committed in the run-up to the coup.

But the former head-of-state has not lost hope that he could come back to power. "I am still one of the most important actors of the republic. I will be [a] candidate at the next presidential elections," he told IWPR from his home in Togo.

Officials in the capital, Bangui, have said that he is free to return to contest the 2010 poll - he has already undergone some degree of political rehabilitation, receiving an amnesty from the government - but his electoral prospects do not look good.

He has been disowned by his own party and commentators say he has lost his ability to mobilise the masses - despite retaining the loyalty of his tribe, one of the largest in the country.

Moreover, there are concerns that his return could create instability. Analysts say it might provoke victims of the blood-letting that led to the 2003 coup, who believe he should be prosecuted by the ICC; and spark a new potentially violent confrontation with Bozize.

The ICC has been investigating violence against civilians committed during Patasse's power struggle with Bozize from 2002-2003.

So far, only Congolese militia leader Jean-Pierre Bemba has been indicted by the court, and is currently in custody.

Prosecutors say Bemba's Mouvement de Liberation du Congo, MLC, fighters committed crimes against civilians while ostensibly aiding Patasse against Bozize's rebels.

CAR citizens IWPR recently spoke to (http://www.iwpr.net/?p=acr&s=f&o=352305&apc_state=heniacr200905) accuse Patasse of allowing Bemba's troops to enter the country, where they sought to combat Bozize's attempts to seize power.

ICC prosecutors have stressed that investigations are continuing in CAR, and human rights groups expect more arrest warrants will follow.

During Bemba's confirmation of charges hearing at the ICC, the prosecution said that Patasse entered into a common plan with Bemba, intending that crimes be committed.

"Patasse publicly called on Bemba to help and Bemba agreed. The single mandate was to protect Patasse's presidency and attack civilians thought to be allied to rebels," said senior prosecutor lawyer Petra Kneur.

Many of the CAR citizens IWPR spoke to in the aforementioned IWPR story said they wanted Patasse to face justice in The Hague. But prosecutors say that they lack the evidence to issue an arrest warrant against him.

"Patasse was, no doubt, a very important actor in the CAR situation in 2002-2003 and he was the one who invited the MLC troops to the CAR. But this is not enough," said ICC deputy prosecutor Fatou Bensouda, in a recent interview with IWPR.

"The fact there is no arrest warrant for Patasse is because we don't have the evidence. We are driven by the evidence and the evidence alone."

Although the country has been in chaos since the 2002-2003 fighting, recent efforts to bring stability to CAR have seen Patasse somewhat rehabilitated.

He even participated in inclusive political talks last December in the capital of Bangui. The talks brought together rebels, politicians and the government in an attempt to find a path towards stability for the country.

"After the talks in December, Patasse has been amnestied, like everyone else. Therefore he can enjoy all his civic and political rights today," said Bruno Hyancinthe Gbiegba who works for the CAR coalition for the ICC, CICC - a network of NGOs and human rights organisations which work as a watchdog for the court.

"It is up to him to come to Bangui and be [a] candidate in the next elections."

However, the amnesty granted by CAR does not cover grave war crimes or crimes against humanity, and therefore would have no bearing on any ICC case against the former president, or indeed anyone else accused of orchestrating atrocities in the country.

"[Patasse] can run for president even if it means international justice will have to do its work afterwards," said security minister General Jules-Bernard Ouande.

Human rights groups are calling for the ICC to carry on investigating the events of 2002-2003 and the roles of the different leaders, including Patasse.

Despite the arrest of Bemba, there are still other groups and individuals that must be investigated and tried, said Godfrey Byaraha, CAR expert at Amnesty International.

“Patasse was the president and had power over the CAR armed forces, which were implicated in the violation of human rights. Therefore, there is a great possibility that he is guilty of grave crimes or at least guilty of not trying to stop these crimes,” he said.

Patasse was prevented from participating in the 2005 presidential elections in 2005, which saw Bozize elected, two years after he seized power in a coup.

According to the former president, however, Bozize is still not a legitimate leader and has no support from the population.

The invalidation of Patasse’s candidature in 2005 was due to a court ruling which found that his birth certificate was illegible.

“You understand how Bozize and his supporters manipulated the electoral laws in 2005. He was afraid of me because of my popularity,” Patasse told IWPR.

Speaking to IWPR, Patasse said repeatedly that he was “aware of nothing” when it was put to him that CAR citizens blame him for inviting Bemba’s men into the country, and for not stopping the atrocities they allegedly committed.

Patasse says he didn’t know about Bemba’s trial at the ICC and when asked whether it would have been possible to halt violence against civilians between 2002-2003, he would only say, “We are not in 2002-2003, we are in 2009.”

When pressed on the latter question, he said, “Ask the question to the current president. I repeat, these issues do not concern me.

“Complaints brought by Bozize to the ICC are illegal. It is not up to Bozize the rebel to complain, it is up to me who was representing the legal government at the time.”

In the run-up to the 2010 election, nobody will be able to stop Patasse from campaigning since the local amnesty granted him the right to run for the presidency.

However, people’s opinions of him in the CAR do not seem to match his aspirations.

“Coming from Patasse, a declaration that he will be running in the next election is a provocation towards the Central African people,” said Vincent Mambachaka, a civil society leader.

“His victims are here. They have not received any compensation. There is an investigation by the ICC about the crimes committed six years ago,” said Abakar Nyakanda, human rights high commissioner in CAR.

“I am of those who think he should not come back. It would be an insult for all his victims and it would be incomprehensible for the international community [to allow this].”

Patasse’s support seems to have withered indeed. Even his old party, the Mouvement de Libération du Peuple Centrafricain, MLPC, has disowned him.

“He is an active member of the MLPC, but he is suspended from the leadership. He cannot be our candidate,” said Martin Ziguele, president of the MLPC.

The former president is still supported by an unofficial branch of the MLPC led by Luc Apollinaire Dondon-Konamembaye, who was president of the national assembly under Patasse.

He is also likely to benefit from support among his own tribe, the Gbaya, one of the largest ethnic groups in the CAR, making up 34 per cent of the population.

“Central Africans don’t vote based on ideology or a programme. They vote on ethnicity. Patasse’s tribe should therefore vote massively for him,” said Prosper Yaka Maïde, journalist at the Central African news agency.

In the past, Patasse enjoyed the Gbaya’s support, as well as that of the Kaba and of the Kare, the ethnic groups of his mother.

Nevertheless, it will be very difficult for the 72-year-old politician to mobilise support as he did at the beginning of the Nineties, when he was the charismatic leader of the MLPC.

“Patasse, I think, is still in a sort of dream, of his past, of his power. Those who knew him, my generation, are not the ones who will vote. There is a new generation and they are starting to forget about him,” said Mambachaka.

Cut off from his country, Patasse may have misinterpreted the interest he aroused when he came back in December last year, said Maide.

When the former president returned to CAR for inclusive talks, people flocked to see his arrival in the capital.

But according to Maide, they were merely interested to see a famous political figure.

“If Michael Jackson comes to Bangui, people will go and see him, whether they like him or not, just out of curiosity. [Patasse is] making a lot of noise for nothing,” he said.

Nevertheless, some say the mere participation of Patasse in the poll and his return to the CAR could lead to a new crisis in the country.

The long-running feud between Bozize and Patasse, which appeared to be resolved with their joint participation in the December talks, could re-emerge in a competitive electoral campaign, say observers.

Pierre Debato, president of the Media Observatory in Bangui, is concerned.

“It is dangerous for CAR because...Bozize and co – they are going to collide with each other again. They all have issues with one another and this will give rise to new tensions,” he said.

“In the past 20 years, it has always been the same problems over and over again, because rancour remains.”

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