



Rwanda's Growing Role in the Central African Republic

Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°191

Bangui/Nairobi/Brussels, 7 July 2023

What's new? Rwanda has become highly influential in the Central African Republic (CAR). The main provider of blue helmets for the UN mission in the country, Kigali has also dispatched soldiers under a bilateral agreement. It is helping strengthen CAR's institutions, while securing mining concessions and land for agricultural projects.

Why does it matter? The CAR-Rwanda partnership has brought positive results but also risks. Central Africans support the presence of Rwandan troops but see Kigali's business ventures as unfair competition. Rwanda could also wind up at odds with the Russian Wagner Group, CAR's other major security partner.

What should be done? Both CAR and Rwanda would benefit from making the agreements underlying their partnership more transparent. Kigali should redouble efforts to revive the moribund peace process between CAR's government and insurgencies. Bangui should seek to defuse tensions between Kigali and Wagner.

I. Overview

In the space of a few years, Rwanda has become a key player in the Central African Republic (CAR). Already the main contributor of blue helmets to MINUSCA, the UN mission in the country, Kigali deployed additional troops at Bangui's request to help the government push back rebels during the 2020 presidential election campaign. The two countries have signed various agreements pledging Rwandan investment and support for institutional reform in CAR. Other developments, however, could over time mar relations between the two countries. Central African businesspeople fear unfair competition from their Rwandan counterparts, who enjoy special protections, including from Rwandan soldiers, for their projects. At the same time, Rwanda – like many other governments – distrusts CAR's other security partner, the Wagner Group, the Russian private firm that mutinied against the Kremlin on 24 June. Bangui and Kigali should act now to stop these problems from adding to the Central African Republic's longstanding instability.

Rwanda's influence in CAR is growing as Bangui faces grave challenges, including several insurgencies. Bangui launched a counteroffensive in early 2021, forcing rebels to withdraw from major cities, yet they remain strong in rural areas. Rebels have stepped up attacks throughout the country since late 2022. The insurgencies are entrenched, and a purely military solution seems farfetched. Still, it hardly helps that the

private security contractors CAR has hired for counter-insurgency operations, chiefly Wagner, appear as intent on extracting natural resources as on fighting rebels. The political arena is polarised, all the more so since President Faustin-Archange Touadéra began seeking to amend the constitution to allow himself to run for a third term in office. Tensions are likely to rise further around the constitutional referendum scheduled for July. To make matters worse, state coffers are emptying fast as donors freeze their budget support due to the government's links to Wagner.

In these circumstances, an expanded partnership with Rwanda looks like a way for CAR authorities to mitigate the risk of a full-blown crisis. Well-trained Rwandan troops are improving security in several parts of the country. Kigali has also played a role in peace agreements with the armed groups, including through the appointment of Rwandan nationals to key positions in international organisations – the UN and the World Bank – in CAR. The Bangui-Kigali agreements include measures to strengthen the Central African state – civil service modernisation and security sector reform – along with promotion of investment to keep an economy hit hard by the commodity price shocks of the last few years afloat.

Rwanda's intervention also helps improve its standing on the continent. Providing military support to CAR gives Kigali a chance to burnish its image as a guarantor of stability, under the banner of “African solutions to African problems”, a vision close to Rwandan President Paul Kagame's heart that Western capitals often also endorse as an alternative to large outside peacekeeping missions. Its efforts to date in CAR, and in Mozambique, where Rwandan forces have helped contain a jihadist insurgency, have earned it considerable respect. These interventions also arm Kigali with arguments to counter growing anger at its backing for the M23 rebellion in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Rwanda's military diplomacy in CAR has brought financial rewards as well. Kigali has signed economic agreements with Bangui, taking advantage of the latter's propensity since colonial times for letting foreign powers exploit the country's natural resources – notably, gold, diamonds and timber. The economic aspect plays a central role in the partnership with Bangui, to the extent that Rwandan troops in CAR are often employed to escort Rwandan businesspeople and guard mines rather than patrol the areas stricken by conflict.

The dual nature of the Rwandan presence in CAR – providing security while seeking profit – could cause problems. Central Africans fear organised predation at the hands of Rwandan investors, who are perceived to be enjoying unfair advantages granted by CAR's government. This worry, heightened by the secrecy surrounding Kigali's financial rewards, could lead to looting and violence targeting Rwandans. Rwanda's mining interests also pit it directly against Wagner. Such budding rivalry, combined with rumours that Washington plans to back Kigali in countering Wagner's influence in CAR, could lead to clashes between Rwandan soldiers and Russian mercenaries.

Lowering these risks would benefit both CAR and Rwanda. The former could build on the partnership's successes to gradually restore peace in the country, while the latter could forge a reputation as a stabilising force in Africa (despite its controversial actions in the DRC). Ideally, Bangui and Kigali should disclose the contents of their bilateral agreements, submitting them for examination by CAR's parliament – as per its constitutional prerogative – in order to lift the secrecy that shrouds the partnership and allay the resulting anxieties. Rwanda should help restart dialogue between

the government and rebels. It should also link its military support for CAR to army reform. As for Rwandan investors, they should help build the formal economy; they can also improve Central Africans' perceptions of their activities by engaging directly with local authorities and rural communities. Finally, Rwanda should be wary of being drawn into the tussle for influence being waged between Western countries and Russia in Africa. Kigali should take care that its intervention does not wind up creating additional problems for CAR, the country it is working to help.

II. Rwanda Engages in CAR

Over recent decades, African leaders have increasingly swung behind the mantra of “African solutions to African problems” – namely, autonomous continental action, particularly in the peace and security domain. As part of the goal is to free Africa from dependence on lengthy, costly international missions, the UN and Western countries have warmed to the idea as well. President Kagame is a big proponent of this idea. When he held the African Union's rotating chair in 2018, Kagame energetically pushed for reforms aimed at making the body more financially independent and better prepared to tackle insecurity on the continent.¹ Rwanda aspires to a leading role in finding “African solutions”. Among the countries where it has been active in recent years is the Central African Republic, where Kigali has invested significant military, economic and political capital. In May 2022, Rwanda opened an embassy in Bangui, a visible symbol of increasing cooperation between the two countries.²

A. *A Laboratory for Rwandan Military Diplomacy*

Rwanda's strategy in CAR fits into its wider military diplomacy, which since 2005 has allowed Kigali to forge economic partnerships with the countries where it maintains troops and that have the natural resources it lacks.³ This policy took shape in the wake of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, which revealed, in Kigali's view, that African countries could not rely on international intervention and should develop more robust capabilities themselves. Through contributions to UN and African Union (AU) missions, Kigali has turned peacekeeping into a foreign policy tool, integrating it into the official Rwanda Defence Force mandate and establishing the Rwanda Peace Academy in 2013 to train officers for this role.⁴ Bilateral interventions in CAR and Mozambique (and another expected in Benin) have bolstered Rwanda's reputation as a credible African alternative to multilateral operations, which have often been ineffective.⁵ Its missions

¹ See Crisis Group Commentary, “Eight Priorities for the African Union in 2019”, 6 February 2019.

² Rwanda's ambassador in Bangui, Olivier Kayumba, was formerly permanent secretary to the minister of emergency management. At the time of writing, the embassy was not fully staffed.

³ Federico Donelli, “Rwanda's Military Diplomacy: Kigali's Political Use of the Military Means to Increase Prestige and Influence in Africa and Beyond”, Institut Français des Relations Internationales, April 2022.

⁴ “Les bonnes affaires de la diplomatie militaire du Rwanda”, *Le Monde*, 1 April 2022. Since 2006, Rwanda has been a leading provider of blue helmets to UN missions. In December 2022, the top ten troop contributors were: Rwanda (1,660), Bangladesh (1,333), Pakistan (1,275), Egypt (989), Zambia (910), Nepal (769), Morocco (750), Cameroon (750), Burundi (747) and Mauritania (450).

⁵ Rwandan intervention in Mozambique is also informed by national security concerns. “Avec son intervention militaire au Mozambique, le Rwanda élargit sa zone d'influence”, *Le Monde Afrique*,

tend to perform functions closer to counter-insurgency than traditional peacekeeping, in keeping with increasing demand on the continent for tougher military action to beat back jihadist militants and other armed groups.

Over the years, Rwanda has become the largest contributor of troops to CAR. Kigali has been involved in the Central African crisis since 2013. That year, the coup carried out by the Séléka, a predominantly Muslim rebel coalition, ousted President François Bozizé and plunged the country into civil war, as parts of the population formed militias, known as anti-balaka groups, that attacked not only Séléka fighters but also Muslim civilians. Rwanda's commitment began with the deployment of 850 soldiers as part of the mission first led by the AU.⁶ Its role has steadily expanded within MINUSCA, which took over in 2014; by 2022, it was contributing more than 2,000 soldiers and police officers.⁷ MINUSCA's Rwandan blue helmets are mainly deployed in three areas: Bangui, central regions and the borderlands adjacent to the DRC.⁸ In Bangui, they have worked as bodyguards for senior Central African politicians, including the head of state, since 2015.⁹ The Rwandan element of MINUSCA is one of the few with the requisite discipline and professionalism to be assigned missions of great sensitivity or requiring combat.

The deployment of Rwandan troops to CAR bilaterally is likewise part of Kigali's military diplomacy. In 2016, President Touadéra began actively seeking more counter-insurgency assistance following the withdrawal of the French mission, Sangaris, alongside MINUSCA's repeated failures to contain the dozen or so armed groups that emerged from the 2013 crisis.¹⁰ He also wanted to attract private investment to re-launch CAR's development plans.¹¹ These factors, combined with the abundant natural resources in the country's interior, made CAR of great interest to Kigali. In October 2019, following a visit to Bangui by President Kagame, the two countries signed a military cooperation accord, the details of which were kept secret.¹²

In December 2020, Kigali sent nearly a thousand soldiers to CAR at Touadéra's urgent request.¹³ It was a particularly tense moment in the country. A presidential election was around the corner. The ex-president, Bozizé, had established a new rebel group, the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC), to block the vote because the Constitutional Court had annulled his candidacy. The CPC brought together the six most powerful

29 September 2021. "Le Rwanda promet son aide au Bénin face à la menace terroriste", *Jeune Afrique*, 16 April 2023.

⁶ The AU established the International Support Mission to the Central African Republic in July 2013, following the coup that ousted President Bozizé. This peacekeeping mission now forms part of MINUSCA. "Centrafrique : 850 soldats rwandais en renfort", *Le Monde*, 16 January 2014.

⁷ As of 30 June 2022, Rwanda was supplying 1,660 troops, 507 police officers and 30 staff officers – or 20 per cent of the soldiers and 15 per cent of the police – to MINUSCA. UN Security Council, "Central African Republic: Report of the Secretary General", June 2022, pp. 19-20.

⁸ Rwandan troops are deployed in Kaga-Bandoro (Nana-Gribizi prefecture), Bria (Haute-Kotto), Bangassou and Rafai (Haut-Mbomou).

⁹ Rwandan soldiers also protect the president of the National Assembly, the prime minister and many members of CAR's cabinet. "Centrafrique : pour la sécurité de Catherine Samba-Panza, des Rwandais pour boucliers", *Jeune Afrique*, 23 November 2015.

¹⁰ "Centrafrique : la France met officiellement fin à l'opération Sangaris", *Le Monde*, 31 October 2016.

¹¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, diplomat, September 2022.

¹² "Rwanda : Première visite officielle de Kagamé en Centrafrique", RFI, 15 October 2019.

¹³ Crisis Group interviews, Rwandan Defence Force leaders, February 2023.

armed groups, a heterogeneous coalition of ex-Séléka and anti-balaka elements.¹⁴ When the Rwandan soldiers arrived, the CPC had moved closer to towns around Bangui, such as Damara and Boali, and was threatening to march on the capital.

Kigali invoked MINUSCA's perceived weakness to justify the new deployment. At the time, Rwanda's defence minister said the troops were reinforcements for Rwandan blue helmets whom rebels were shooting at.¹⁵ A few months later, Kagame claimed that the UN force was "stymied, as it was in Rwanda in 1994".¹⁶ As a result, he said, Bangui and Kigali struck a bilateral agreement, although Kigali has not sent troops bilaterally to other countries in which it has troops under the UN's auspices facing similar difficulties.¹⁷

In any case, between January and June 2021, this new Rwandan contingent, unrestricted by UN rules of engagement, helped repel the CPC alongside a force led by the Central African army and Wagner paramilitaries. The operation liberated the country's main towns but failed to stamp out the rebellion.¹⁸ Central African soldiers and their Russian allies continued to fight the rebels in the north west and north east of the country. At Touadéra's request, however, the Rwandans have assumed a protective, rather than offensive, role, setting up camp so far away from the fronts that the CPC no longer considers them a threat.¹⁹ Most remained in Bangui and the two prefectures closest to the capital, Ombella-M'poko and Lobaye. They established two bases, in Damara, not far from the head of state's second residence, and in Bokoko, some 40km from the Berengo base used by Wagner. Economic interests may have helped determine the bases' locations. These areas are close to places where Rwanda has made investments, but far from regions requiring urgent military responses.²⁰

In addition to helping drive the CPC into the countryside, Rwanda is supporting security sector reform – an initiative also backed by MINUSCA.²¹ This reform, under way since August 2021, is a priority for Kigali and a prerequisite for ending its bilateral military assistance.²² It involves equipping, training and deploying units of the Central African army and security forces. The training program will begin as soon as CAR makes the necessary facilities available. But it will put Rwanda in direct competition with Wagner. The Russian mercenaries have been training Central African sol-

¹⁴ "Centrafrique : signature d'un accord de fin des hostilités à Nairobi", RFI, 28 January 2015.

¹⁵ "Centrafrique : pour la première fois, les rebelles de la CPC attaquent la capitale", RFI, 14 January 2021. "Centrafrique : le gouvernement annonce que le Rwanda et la Russie ont envoyé des soldats", TV5 Monde/AFP, 21 December 2020.

¹⁶ "Paul Kagamé: Non, le Rwanda n'est pas une monarchie", *Jeune Afrique*, June 2021.

¹⁷ Several Rwandan blue helmets have been killed in Sudan and South Sudan since 2009. "Ban deplores deadly consecutive attacks against blue helmets in Darfur", UN, 8 December 2009; "Three blue helmets serving with UN-African force killed in ambush in Darfur", UN, 21 June 2010; "South Sudanese diplomat expresses his condolences over peacekeepers killings", Africanews, 12 July 2016.

¹⁸ See Crisis Group Commentary, "Central African Republic: Averting Further Fragmentation of the Armed Forces", 10 May 2022.

¹⁹ Crisis Group telephone interviews, CPC leaders, February 2023, Rwandan official, June 2023.

²⁰ Ombella-M'poko and Lobaye, two prefectures that have mostly been spared fighting with rebels, are home to several Rwandan investor projects in mining and agriculture.

²¹ In August 2021, the two countries signed an agreement in which Rwanda pledged this assistance. "Le Rwanda projette d'élargir son appui à l'armée centrafricaine", Agence Anadolu, 27 October 2022.

²² Crisis Group interviews, Rwandan Defence Force officials, February 2023.

diers exclusively since November 2021, when the European Union (EU) suspended its training mission due to Wagner's interference.²³

For the most part, Rwandan soldiers in CAR, whether blue helmets or bilaterally deployed troops, have a good reputation with the Central African authorities and population.²⁴ Many Bangui residents express gratitude for Rwandan forces' assistance in beating back the CPC, as well as in opening the Bangui-Beloko road, the main artery connecting the capital to Cameroon.²⁵ True, a few incidents have tarnished their image. In April 2018, for instance, Rwandan blue helmets participated in a MINUSCA operation to disarm a militia in Bangui's third district. The operation was allegedly botched, and dozens of civilians were killed.²⁶ In October 2022, three Rwandan soldiers from the bilateral detachments were accused of attempted rape near Mbaïki in the south west.²⁷ But these incidents, while serious, are few in number compared to those involving other UN forces operating in CAR and to the grave human rights violations perpetrated by Wagner paramilitaries, both of which have included sexual exploitation and abuse.²⁸ Overall, the Rwandan forces are well respected and appreciated in the country.

B. *Extensive Use of Soft Power*

Since 2021, Rwanda has also been closely involved in attempts to revive the peace process in CAR, in partnership with Angola. The Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF), which assumed power after the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, argues that it led subsequent reconciliation efforts there and says it wants to share its expertise with CAR, a country that the U.S., France and the UN described in 2013 as being in a "pre-genocidal" situation.²⁹

The peace process had been in a parlous state. Launched by the AU in 2017, negotiations gained momentum the following year after Russia brokered exchanges between Touadéra and rebel leaders. In February 2019, the government signed a peace agreement with fourteen armed groups, arguably the most comprehensive such deal ever in the country, but it never really stuck due to Touadéra's reluctance to engage in substantial reforms and rebels' unwillingness to give up control of key economic sectors,

²³ "RCA : l'Europe 'suspend' sa mission de formation militaire à cause des mercenaires russes de Wagner", *Le Monde*, 15 December 2021.

²⁴ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Western diplomats, February 2023.

²⁵ "Deux attaques rebelles repoussées à l'entrée de Bangui, capitale de la Centrafrique", *Le Monde/AFP*, 13 January 2021. "Centrafrique : face aux rebelles qui veulent asphyxier Bangui, Touadéra privilégie la force", *Jeune Afrique*, 8 February 2021.

²⁶ " Crainte de bavure autour de 27 morts à Bangui", *VOA/AFP*, 24 April 2019. "Le gouvernement et la Minusca dénonce l'instrumentalisation de l'opération militaire au Km5", UN, 18 April 2018.

²⁷ The incident was reported during a meeting between Rwandan commanders and local authorities in October 2022. The Rwandan authorities launched an inquiry. "Compte rendu de reunion du 20 octobre 2022 à Mbaïki", Lobaye Prefecture, October 2022. Crisis Group interview, Mbaïki, November 2022.

²⁸ "Centrafrique : des Casques bleus congolais vont partir en raison d'allégations d'exploitation et d'abus sexuels", UN, 21 June 2017. "Centrafrique : enquête de l'ONU sur un Casque bleu soupçonné de trafic de munitions", *Jeune Afrique/AFP*, 15 April 2018. "RCA : Le groupe russe Wagner harcèle et intimide les civils – experts de l'ONU", UN High Commission for Human Rights, 27 October 2021.

²⁹ In April 2022, during a commemoration in Bangui of the 1994 genocide, Kayumba, head of Rwanda's diplomatic mission in CAR, expressed his country's wish to erect a monument in memory of the events in CAR's capital for the Rwandans living there. "La Centrafrique est-elle au bord du génocide ?", RFI, 21 November 2013.

such as mining and herding.³⁰ In 2020, following the CPC's offensive and subsequent retreat, Touadéra ended dialogue with the rebels, gambling instead on military victory and, in effect, voiding the agreement.³¹

Rwanda's diplomacy has subsequently kept alive a peace process that was deeply weakened. In early 2021, under international pressure to resume negotiations with the CPC, Touadéra approached Rwanda, along with Angola, to serve as facilitators.³² He had previously rejected offers of diplomatic intervention from the Republic of Congo and Chad, sceptical of their neutrality. Under the aegis of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region, of which Angola, CAR and Rwanda are members, CAR's government and armed groups agreed on a roadmap to resolve the crisis, signed in the Angolan capital Luanda in September 2021. This plan provided for exiling rebel leaders to neighbouring countries, granting them de facto immunity and quartering rank-and-file fighters to be disarmed.³³ But two years on, little progress is evident, due to growing mutual mistrust. An upsurge in violence since 2022 may have made the moment propitious to renew efforts.

Kigali has managed to get several Rwandans appointed to key positions in UN institutions. In June 2021, Rwanda's chief inspector Christophe Bizimungu took command of the MINUSCA police.³⁴ Another example is Valentine Rugwabisa, who was named the Secretary-General's special representative for MINUSCA – in essence, the mission chief – in February 2022.³⁵ Rugwabisa has helped normalise relations between MINUSCA and CAR's government, which had been strained by Wagner's presence as well as friction between the blue helmets and the national army.³⁶ Another Rwandan, Vedaste Kalima, runs the Central African office of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, which helps get emergency aid to the 56 per cent of the population who need it.³⁷

Rwanda is also helping strengthen CAR's state institutions.³⁸ Since 2019, Kigali has been providing technical advice to Central African institutions in parallel with its military assistance. It has offered to help the UN organise local elections, which were

³⁰ See Crisis Group Africa Report N°277, *Making the Central African Republic's Latest Peace Agreement Stick*, 18 June 2019.

³¹ "Centrafrique : un accord de paix jamais consolidé", Deutsche Welle, 8 January 2021.

³² Crisis Group interviews, diplomat, Bangui, February 2021.

³³ By the quartering arrangement (*cantonnement*), fighters are to assemble in given locations, making it easier to track how many have been disarmed. "Final report of the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic extended pursuant to Security Council resolution 2588 (2021)", UN Security Council, 29 June 2022.

³⁴ This specialist in criminal law and Rwandan police commander was previously a member of the national police academy's management board in Kigali.

³⁵ Before being appointed to this post, Rugwabisa ran the Rwanda Development Board, a government body established to attract foreign investment. She also represented Rwanda in key diplomatic posts, notably as the country's ambassador to the UN.

³⁶ Members of the presidential guard fired upon Egyptian blue helmets in November 2021, wounding ten of them. "RCA : dix Casques bleus égyptiens blessés par balles par des éléments de la garde présidentielle", UN, 2 November 2021.

³⁷ "Central African Republic, situation report", UN Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs, 10 March 2023.

³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Rwandan officials, Kigali, February 2023.

scheduled for July but have been postponed indefinitely.³⁹ Rwandan officials say they aim to help strengthen national institutions and prepare the ground for lasting stability in CAR.⁴⁰ (Rwanda stands to gain from a more stable CAR, in the sense that its investments should thus be better protected.) The partnership with Kigali has smoothed the way for structural reforms in CAR, such as in the civil service and public finance. In April 2022, Bangui signed an agreement with Rwanda Cooperation, an agency Kigali calls a “South-South” collaboration body, that has subsequently sent experts to CAR.⁴¹ The same partnership had already helped CAR’s government roll out a data-driven human resource management system in 2020, allowing the civil service to keep better track of personnel, deleting phantom staff from the payroll and fixing other irregularities that were reportedly costing the government some \$1 million per year.⁴²

This Rwandan support comes at a time when relations between CAR and Western donors are fraught. The World Bank withdrew its budget support for the country in May 2022, citing a lack of transparency in government finances.⁴³ France and the European Union also froze their contributions, objecting to Bangui’s use of public funds to pay Wagner, which they accuse of disseminating anti-Western propaganda, among other things.⁴⁴ As foreign aid makes up 50 per cent of state revenues, these decisions triggered a fiscal crisis in CAR.⁴⁵ Bangui claims that France and other Western countries are waging economic war on CAR to punish it for its links with Russia.⁴⁶ Relief may be on the way. In June 2022, the World Bank appointed Guido Rurangwa, a Rwandan economist, as its representative for CAR. This move could help improve the institution’s relations with Bangui, as has already happened following the appointment of Rugwabisa as head of MINUSCA.⁴⁷

³⁹ “Productive meeting with H.E. Minister of Foreign Affairs of Rwanda to discuss support to local elections in CAR as well as opportunities for strengthened partnership on stabilization & other development priorities in CAR”. Tweet by Jean-Luc Stalon, UNDP representative in Bangui, @JLStalon, 10:05am, 8 March 2023. Local elections were delayed in May, after Touadéra set the constitutional referendum as the higher priority. CAR’s National Elections Authority said it did not have enough money to hold local elections. “Centrafrique, le référendum constitutionnel, porte-ouverte vers un 3ème mandat du président Touadéra ?”, RFI, 31 May 2023.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Rwandan officials, Kigali, February 2023.

⁴¹ The agreement among CAR, the UN Development Programme and Rwanda Cooperation contemplates cooperation in modernising the civil service and social welfare programs, as well as in reforming public finance and overseeing the disarmament, demobilisation, reintegration and repatriation process. Rwanda Cooperation, according to its website, is a “hub for learning that promotes knowledge exchange on development through South-South and Triangular Cooperation”.

⁴² Crisis Group interviews, Central African officials, Bangui, September 2022.

⁴³ “La Banque mondiale exhorte le gouvernement centrafricain à la réforme”, RFI, 13 May 2022.

⁴⁴ “Centrafrique : la France gèle son aide budgétaire et suspend sa coopération militaire”, TV5 Monde, 7 June 2021.

⁴⁵ “La Centrafrique, un État sous perfusion de l’aide internationale”, *Le Monde*, 16 December 2020.

⁴⁶ “The time has come to criticise the pressure that certain powers are placing on donors”, Touadéra has said, “turning development funding into a tool of geopolitical manipulation and taking our populations hostage”. “Sommet de Dakar 2 sur l’agriculture et la souveraineté alimentaire, discours du président Touadéra à l’occasion de la présentation du pacte national pour l’alimentation et l’agriculture aux partenaires internationaux”, aBangui.com, 26 January 2023.

⁴⁷ Rurangwa, a World Bank official since 2001, formerly worked in the Rwandan ministry of finance and economic planning and in Rwanda’s central bank, as a specialist in economic stimulus, fiscal and budget reforms.

C. *Growing Economic Influence*

Kigali has also signed economic agreements with Bangui, which serves two important purposes for Rwanda. Investment in extracting CAR's mineral wealth in particular helps compensate for Rwanda's lack of natural resources of its own.⁴⁸ It also helps recoup the costs of the military intervention in CAR.⁴⁹ Kigali generally uses firms like Crystal Ventures, a holding company owned by the ruling party, to manage its commercial projects in CAR and the Rwandan army to protect them.⁵⁰

Rwandans are pursuing an array of businesses in CAR. As of 2022, Rwandans had established more companies in CAR than any other foreign nationals except Cameroonians.⁵¹ The number is still growing: more than a hundred Rwandan firms are registered in the country today, up from about twenty in 2019.⁵² These firms have diverse interests: they produce consumer goods such as mineral water and yoghurt, and they hold stakes in transport, logistics, restaurants, hotels, real estate and public infrastructure projects.⁵³ Rwandan investors are also making liberal use of Rwandair, the national airline that began twice-weekly flights to Bangui in 2021, to bring items in and out of CAR. To take just one example, chickens reared in Rwanda are now exported to Bangui.⁵⁴

The agricultural sector is particularly lucrative for Rwandan companies, partly thanks to special facilities provided by CAR authorities.⁵⁵ Rwandan entrepreneurs have bought up land around Bangui to set up farms, though how much is hard to know.⁵⁶ In Lobaye and Ombella-M'poko, Central Africans often manage Rwandan-owned farms, making it difficult to identify the true proprietors. Like the soldiers holed up in their bases, the big Rwandan farmers keep a low profile.

More importantly, Rwanda is moving into the mining industry, alongside China and Russia. CAR is home to sizeable deposits of gold, diamonds, fossil fuels and uranium. Mining is largely artisanal and barely regulated (if at all). It has long been a significant source of income for rural dwellers and, more recently, for rebel groups as well. The government is awarding more and more large commercial mining concessions, however, mostly to foreign investors, in exchange for financial compensation or other services, such as those provided by private security companies.

Rwandan companies, controlled by both private business interests and the ruling party, have started mining operations in CAR. Crystal Ventures is active in mining

⁴⁸ "Examen des politiques commerciales", International Labour Organization, p. 1.

⁴⁹ No figure is available. Rwanda says it spends \$250 million per year on its intervention in Mozambique. Crisis Group interview, senior Rwandan Defence Forces officer, Kigali, February 2023. Its force in CAR is smaller, however.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, Kigali, February 2023. "Au Rwanda, les discrets atouts de la diplomatie économique de Paul Kagamé", *Jeune Afrique*, 2 May 2023.

⁵¹ Statistics from CAR's ministry of economy.

⁵² These numbers might seem small, but they are significant in the Central African economy. In 2021, CAR's estimated GDP was \$2.52 billion, among the lowest in the world. World Bank, "Central Africa Republic, Overview".

⁵³ The Rwandan group Iriba Water opened a subsidiary in Bangui called Iriba Water Group RCA, specialised in bottling mineral water.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, senior official, Kigali, February 2023.

⁵⁵ "La Centrafrique souhaite la bienvenue aux investisseurs rwandais opérant dans l'agriculture et les banques", Rwandan Embassy in Congo-Brazzaville, February 2021.

⁵⁶ These farms rear broiler chickens and pigs. They also grow onions and rice.

through Vogueroc, a firm established in 2021 and run by Olivier Kabera, a Rwandan entrepreneur of Central African nationality.⁵⁷ In October 2022, Vogueroc got a 25-year concession to open mines at five Central African locations.⁵⁸ Also in 2022, another Rwandan citizen founded Afrika Oko, at that time the only corporation in CAR authorised to operate along the entire mining production chain – from prospecting to exporting. The company also has dispensation to deal in gold, diamonds and petroleum products.⁵⁹ “[In Rwanda] we have a gold refinery, as well as tantalum and niobium smelters, so we need to establish legal supply chains”, said a Rwandan official, explaining why the economic agreements signed between the countries are “strategic” for Kigali.⁶⁰

These new businesses are making CAR an attractive destination for Rwandan emigrants. In recent years, more Rwandans have been looking for new places to go, as a Rwandan official explains: “Emigration is in our DNA. Rwandan investors are flocking to CAR because our usual destinations, Uganda and Burundi, are in trouble, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo has also lost its appeal”.⁶¹ Rwanda’s tight labour market may be a push factor: young Rwandans, particularly those from socio-economically disadvantaged groups, may be choosing to migrate to CAR in search of better jobs or business opportunities.⁶² Other emigrants are former Rwandan soldiers returning to CAR after tours of duty in the country.⁶³ A new association of Rwandan citizens in Bangui, founded in 2016, signals that many are interested in settling in their adopted country.⁶⁴

CAR could nonetheless reap benefits from the partnership with Rwanda, particularly if Rwandan private investors help build the formal economy and offer permanent jobs at all levels to qualified Central Africans. The agreements also satisfy the CAR government’s quest for foreign investment as a means of economic development.⁶⁵ Rwanda is only one country to answer the call to invest. The BRICS countries (Bra-

⁵⁷ Vogueroc is registered for the following business activities: “Mining, buying and selling gemstones, gemstone exports, anthracite mining exports, lignite mining exports, crude oil extraction, natural gas extraction, iron ore mining, uranium and thorium mining, mining other non-ferrous metals, stone, sand and clay mining, mining of chemical fertilisers, support services for other mines and quarries”.

⁵⁸ These locations are Dimbi in Basse-Kotto, Gambo and Bangassou in Mbomou, and Bogoin in Ouham, and Bania in Mambéré Kadeï. “Vogueroc donne le top départ de l’offensive rwandaise dans les mines”, *Africa Intelligence*, 21 October 2022. In Bangui, Kabera also manages Rockstir Limited, a company registered with the commerce ministry in 2021, with a wide range of activities that includes trading in gemstones and coffee, providing security and leasing private aircraft.

⁵⁹ “Rwanda/Centrafricque : Paul Kagame, business angel de Touadéra”, *Africa Intelligence*, 7 April 2021.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interview, senior Rwanda Defence Force officer, Kigali, February 2023.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, Rwandan official, Kigali, February 2023.

⁶² In 2021, according to World Bank data, Rwanda’s unemployment rate increased to 15.8 per cent.

⁶³ Crisis Group interviews, Bangui, September 2022.

⁶⁴ “Décision portant agrément de l’association ‘La diaspora rwandaise Isongo’”, Rwandan Ministry of Land Administration, Decentralisation and Local Development, 2016. Officially called Diaspora rwandaise Isongo, this association seeks to “develop links of fraternity, solidarity and friendship among the Rwandan people and diaspora resident in CAR” and “to support its members through socio-economic activities”. It has more than 200 members. Several businesspeople in the association told Crisis Group they have decided to bring their families to CAR to fill jobs in their companies, reflecting their intention to stay for the long term. Crisis Group interviews, Bangui, September 2022.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, diplomat, September 2022.

zil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) opened the bloc's central African office in Bangui and announced various investment projects.⁶⁶

The secrecy around the CAR-Rwanda partnership, however, could well dilute any positive effects it may have on the Central African economy. Bangui has never released the text of the agreements it signed with Kigali in 2019 and 2021, despite a constitutional requirement that parliament approve any foreign partnership involving natural resources or state-run enterprises.⁶⁷ Information obtained by Crisis Group reveals that the agreements focus on developing and protecting private investments, mining and services.⁶⁸ Since then, engagement keeps increasing, as shown by the high-level Rwandan visit to Bangui and the comparable Central African delegation to Kigali in June.⁶⁹ But the lack of information about Rwanda's interests in CAR continues to arouse suspicions among Central Africans.

III. Risks in the Partnership

Rwanda's presence has been largely positive for CAR to date. Rwandan blue helmets in MINUSCA are well regarded for their professionalism, particularly in protecting civilian lives. The bilaterally deployed troops are now hunkered down on bases, but in 2021 they helped drive the CPC away from Bangui and kept open the main roads connecting the city to the rest of the country. Kigali has helped keep the peace process alive, on paper at least, through diplomacy and by securing the appointment of Rwandans to key MINUSCA positions. Rwanda's support for CAR's security and other state institutions is a rare example of progress in bolstering government authority since the country's crisis began in 2013. Finally, private-sector investment, while still at an early stage, could create jobs and help boost the economy.

But Rwanda's activities in CAR also carry risks.⁷⁰ Some have to do with CAR's huge neighbour to the south, the DRC. The Congolese government is furious with Rwanda for, among other things, supporting the M23 rebels wreaking havoc in the DRC's east.⁷¹ Now Rwandan military patrols along the CAR-DRC border are raising additional hack-

⁶⁶ "Centrafrique : plusieurs projets annoncés au deuxième jour de la visite de représentants des Brics", RFI, 12 April 2023.

⁶⁷ "Rwanda : Première visite officielle de Kagamé en Centrafrique", RFI, 15 October 2019. "Centrafrique : le président Touadéra en vise d'Etat au Rwanda", RFI, 5 August 2021. Articles 60 and 80 of the constitution establish this requirement.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Central African officials, Bangui, September 2022. See also "RCA/Rwanda : Bangui et Kigali signent de nouveaux accords et renforcent leurs relations bilatérales", Radio Ndeke Luka, 6 August 2021.

⁶⁹ "La Centrafrique et le Rwanda multiplient les signes de rapprochement", RFI, 10 June 2023.

⁷⁰ See Enrica Picco, "Ten Years after the Coup, is the Central African Republic Facing Another Major Crisis?", Crisis Group Commentary, 22 March 2023.

⁷¹ See Crisis Group Commentary, "A Dangerous Escalation in the Great Lakes", 27 January 2023. The EU may reconsider its funding for Rwanda's military now that UN reports have appeared citing evidence of Rwandan backing for the M23 rebellion. "Final report of the Group of Experts submitted in accordance with paragraph 9 of resolution 2641 (2022)", UN Security Council, 13 June 2023. Kigali has dismissed the UN allegations.

les in Kinshasa. Two Congolese internal memoranda seen by Crisis Group protest that the country is being surrounded.⁷²

Most risks have to do with CAR itself, however. Members of President Touadéra's inner circle favourably compare Rwanda's autocratic style of governance with CAR's "phantom state".⁷³ Opposition figures thus understandably perceive Rwanda's multi-faceted aid as direct support for Touadéra, who is determined to stay in power beyond his constitutional term. The announcement of the July constitutional referendum has deepened anger among the opposition, some of whose leaders are now calling for forcible regime change, as well as among armed groups.⁷⁴ Although Touadéra's authoritarian drift predates the partnership with Rwanda, dissenters say Kigali is party to the Central African crisis while also trying to adjudicate its resolution.⁷⁵ Rwanda rejects the accusations, but sends conflicting signals, such as participating, along with Wagner, in the security plan for the constitutional referendum.⁷⁶ Critics also note that the agreements between Bangui and Kigali remain opaque.⁷⁷

If the two countries do not take corrective measures, Kigali's image of impartiality in the peace process could suffer, precisely when Central African politics are becoming more fraught. Along with Angola, Rwanda is the last partner involved in facilitating a peaceful solution to the conflict, after Touadéra sidelined the others. Putting Rwanda's impartiality in question could deal a fatal blow to the 2019 agreement with the armed groups and unsettle dealings with the main international organisations helping stabilise the country.

Moreover, as described below, the partnership could end up intensifying local conflicts. Two issues – the perceived special treatment of Rwandan investors and Bangui's separate relationship with Wagner – are of particular concern.

A. *A Feeling of Economic Invasion*

The influx of Rwandan investors is giving rise to a sense of economic encroachment among Central Africans, according to interlocutors in Bangui and the Lobaye region.⁷⁸ Central African businesspeople complain that Rwandans enjoy undue privileges due to

⁷² The first memorandum was issued by the DRC Embassy in Bangui on 23 September 2022; the second memorandum was issued by the DRC National Intelligence Agency in Gemena, DRC on 27 September 2022. The two documents have been widely circulated online.

⁷³ Crisis Group telephone interview, diplomat, September 2022.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group telephone interviews, armed group and political opposition representatives, February 2023.

⁷⁵ Critics also voice fear that President Kagame wants to export his authoritarian style of politics to Bangui. They suspect that Rwanda is behind Touadéra's plans to amend the constitution. Among other effects, the amendments would enable Touadéra to run for a third term as president in 2025. The G16, a coalition of civil society organisations defending the 30 March 2016 constitution – run from Paris by Jean-François Akandji-Kombé, a professor – has accused Kigali of bankrolling the constitutional referendum initiative. Rwanda denies this allegation. Crisis Group interviews, Central African opposition politicians, Bangui, September 2022.

⁷⁶ "En Centrafrique, le président Touadéra annonce un référendum pour une nouvelle constitution", *Le Monde*, 31 May 2023. "La Centrafrique et le Rwanda multiplient les signes de rapprochement", RFI, 10 June 2023.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Central African businesspeople and opposition figures, Bangui, November 2022 and February 2023.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Bangui and on the routes to Sibut and Mbaïki, July 2022-March 2023.

their cosiness with Bangui's upper echelons.⁷⁹ The Central Africans feel disadvantageded in comparison.

It feeds the perception of unfair competition that the bilaterally deployed Rwandan troops are protecting their country's economic interests as well as their co-nationals. Since 2021, these soldiers have often become bodyguards for Rwandan business owners in CAR's interior, particularly in the mining regions in the south, centre and east.⁸⁰ Other bilaterally deployed troops are keeping watch over agricultural land belonging to Rwandans, such as a rice farm of about ten hectares in a village 40km from the Damara barracks.⁸¹ The locals say the Rwandan soldiers themselves are the landowners.⁸²

Such practices have already sparked protests. In September 2022, youth demonstrated against a Rwandan artisanal gold mining company in Moboma, a district in the south-western Lobaye prefecture. The firm had allegedly begun digging for gold outside its concession's boundaries, in an area belonging to the local population. Touadéra reacted swiftly, dispatching a special task force to negotiate with the locals. In February, a second protest broke out after the company evicted artisanal miners from an area it considers part of its concession.⁸³

There are also rumours of illegal exploitation. A member of CAR's ruling party claims that Rwandan investors buy minerals on the grey market, noting that "[they] have a direct line to President Touadéra. They come in secretly, buy up the diamonds and leave. They're invisible. But they're out there".⁸⁴ Vogueroc, the Crystal Ventures subsidiary mentioned above, appears to have received highly favourable treatment when parliament examined its application for a mining concession.⁸⁵ Though the company submitted an incomplete dossier, the parliamentary speaker's office, controlled by the ruling party, approved the concession.⁸⁶ This case has fuelled perceptions that Kigali – through companies like Crystal Ventures – is pursuing organised economic

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Bangui, Sibut and Mbaïki, November 2022 and February 2023.

⁸⁰ Rwandan soldiers are thus employed in Bakala in Ouaka prefecture; Kembé and Dimbi in Basse-Kotto; and Moboma and Bagandou in Lobaye.

⁸¹ Crisis Group interviews, Central African businesspeople, Damara, November 2022.

⁸² Crisis Group interviews, Damara residents, November 2022.

⁸³ Crisis Group interviews, Moboma resident, Bangui, March 2023.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview, parliamentary deputy, Bangui, 10 September 2022.

⁸⁵ In a memorandum, Evariste Ngamana, vice president of parliament and a ruling-party member, said the speaker's office had "the right to examine a mining agreement in order to authorise the government to sign said agreement". No.°87/AN/VP/SG/DGSL/.21, 24 September 2021. The speaker's office ratified the agreement in February 2022 despite a technical committee's misgivings about its form and substance.

⁸⁶ Vogueroc's capital amounts to just 1.5 million francs CFA (\$2,500), much less than the minimum spelled out in the mining code, 10 million francs CFA (\$16,700). Even the parliamentary speaker's office raised questions about the company's accounting practices, taxes and royalty payments, as well as its social and environmental responsibility. Crisis Group interviews, people working at the National Assembly, Bangui, September 2022. Vogueroc's general manager Olivier Kabera denied any wrongdoing and welcomed the CAR government's efforts to encourage investment. Crisis Group correspondence, 30 June 2023.

colonisation.⁸⁷ Various sources confirm that Crystal Ventures Centrafrique controls several private Rwandan firms in the country.⁸⁸

As these tensions simmer, the growing Rwandan presence could provoke violent reactions from Central Africans. The country has a long history of popular revolt against the predatory practices of foreign powers operating together with national authorities.⁸⁹ In recent years, Central Africans who feel abandoned by the state have directed their resentment at foreigners whom they suspect of getting preferential treatment from the authorities. In June 2011, pogroms and lootings in Bangui targeted Central Africans of Chadian origin, who were perceived as having links to the government that gave them economic advantages.⁹⁰ Chinese miners have also been attacked: in 2018, a mob lynched three Chinese citizens working in a mine in the north west, accusing them of responsibility for the death of a young Central African.⁹¹ Such violence may be more likely in poor rural areas, where the state is largely absent and the population's alienation deeper. People in the countryside tend to take justice into their own hands by organising militias.⁹²

B. *A Delicate Position vis-à-vis Wagner*

A second problem is the danger that Rwanda will butt heads with the Wagner Group, the CAR government's other key security partner. Kigali has good diplomatic relations with Moscow but distrusts Wagner, suspecting it of funding the anti-Rwandan propaganda now appearing in Central African news outlets and social media.⁹³ Though its troops fought alongside the Russian mercenaries in 2021, Rwanda now goes to great lengths to avoid association with Wagner personnel, as they have been implicated in severe abuses, such as sexual violence against women, men and young girls, as well as torture and summary executions.⁹⁴ As the counter-insurgency campaign proceeds, Ki-

⁸⁷ "Vogueroc donne le top départ de l'offensive rwandaise dans les mines", *Africa Intelligence*, 21 October 2022.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, Kigali, February 2023. Crystal Ventures did not reply to Crisis Group enquiries.

⁸⁹ A war called "*la manche des houes*" or the Kongo-Wara rebellion raged between 1928 and 1933, pitting the Gbaya people of Nana-Mambéré against French colonists. The French had forced the Gbaya to build railways and work in mines. Angered, the people organised a resistance movement, encouraged by their spiritual guide, Barka Ngainoumbey, known as Karnou. Jean-Pierre Tuquoi, *Oubangui-Chari, le pays qui n'existait pas* (Paris, 2017), pp. 121-136.

⁹⁰ The rumoured killing of two children triggered the violence. "Centrafrique : une délégation tchadienne à Bangui en mission de pacification", RFI, 4 June 2011. Bangui residents have long been hostile toward people of Chadian origin.

⁹¹ "Trois Chinois tués en Centrafrique", VOA Afrique, 5 October 2018.

⁹² A militia has formed in the Haut-Mbomou region to defend the population from Fulani herders supported by the Union for Peace in the Central African Republic rebels, who are perceived locally as foreigners. "Le préfet du haut-Mbomou sous pression : une nouvelle milice d'autodéfense locale, Azande Ani Kpi Gbe, appelle à son départ", Corbeaux News, 12 March 2023.

⁹³ Crisis Group interview, Rwandan official, Kigali, February 2023. "La Russie et le Rwanda s'engagent à renforcer les liens diplomatiques existants", *Rwanda News*, 18 June 2023.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Rwandan officials and Rwandan Defence Force officers, February 2023. "Central African Republic: Abuses by Russia-Linked Forces", Human Rights Watch, 3 May 2022. See also "RCA: Le groupe russe Wagner harcèle et intimide les civils – experts de l'ONU", UN High Commission for Human Rights, 27 October 2021; and "Architects of Terror: The Wagner Group's Blueprint for State Capture in the Central African Republic", *The Sentry*, June 2023.

gali has asked CAR's authorities to keep the Wagner and Rwandan areas of operation separate.⁹⁵ A Rwandan military officer summed it up: "We coexist without dialogue, but without confrontation either".⁹⁶

Considerable uncertainty prevails about the future of Wagner in the Central African Republic and Africa more broadly after the private security company's June 2023 rebellion in Russia.⁹⁷ But assuming that Wagner operatives do remain in CAR, frictions between the Russian forces and Rwandan troops could rise, due to competition in economic and security matters. Rwandan mining interests could come into conflict with those of Wagner. In July 2022, Russian mercenaries set up a roadblock to stop a Rwandan military convoy escorting Rwandan miners near Bambari, in the country's centre.⁹⁸ A month earlier, the Russians had driven Rwandan troops out of a mine in the same area.⁹⁹ Such incidents could recur in places where Russians and Rwandans cross paths. Lobaye is a potential flashpoint: as part of the bilateral deployment, Rwandan troops have set up a base in the town of Bokoko, just 40km from Wagner's camp at Berengo. The risk that Rwandan soldiers will clash with Russian mercenaries around mining sites is high.

Rivalry over mineral wealth could exacerbate local conflicts. One place that may be particularly vulnerable is Ouaka – a region of central CAR rich in gold and coveted by both Rwandans and Russians – where Wagner uses local militias (dubbed the "Black Russians") to secure patches of land under its control.¹⁰⁰ If Rwandan businesspeople move into this region, there is a substantial risk that Wagner could use these militias to attack them, as well as any Central Africans who are working with them, sparking a cycle of reprisal.

Rwanda's position as a security partner in CAR also puts it at odds with Wagner, as seen already in the military training domain. Wagner has been training the army since 2018; it has enjoyed a monopoly since the EU suspended its program in 2021. But now bilaterally deployed Rwandan troops are due to open training centres as well, which will introduce competition for the Russian mercenaries – again, assuming the latter remain in CAR. Tensions could arise if the two parties do not clarify, either directly or through CAR government intermediaries, their respective roles, from the particulars of training to accompanying army units in operations.¹⁰¹

Western governments could also contribute, deliberately or inadvertently, to pushing Rwandan forces toward confrontation with Wagner. The U.S., for instance, impressed by Rwanda's contributions to MINUSCA and elsewhere in Africa, could start supporting it as a counterweight to Wagner in CAR.¹⁰² It might be encouraged to do so by Rwandan troops' performance in northern Mozambique, where Kigali sent them in 2021. The troops – subsequently funded by the EU – containing a jihadist threat

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, senior Rwandan Defence Force officers, February 2023.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, senior Rwandan Defence Force officer, February 2023.

⁹⁷ See Alissa de Carbonnel, Oleg Ignatov, Simon Schlegel and Pauline Bax, "Assessing the Wagner Group's Aborted Run on Moscow: What Comes Next?", Crisis Group Commentary, 29 June 2023.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Bangui, November 2022.

⁹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Bangui, September 2022.

¹⁰⁰ The "Black Russians" are former armed group fighters recruited by Wagner to assist in its operations. They do not wear serial numbers or distinctive badges.

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group interviews, senior Rwandan Defence Force officers, February 2023.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, Kigali, February 2023.

where the Mozambican military and Russian mercenaries had failed.¹⁰³ In December 2022, the U.S. involved Rwanda in secret negotiations with Touadéra to reduce Wagner's influence.¹⁰⁴ The Rwandan troops' professionalism does indeed make them preferable to Wagner, but the U.S. overtures are aggravating some in Touadéra's inner circle who have close ties to Wagner: "If the Rwandans want to leave, let them leave ... but the Russians are not going to leave", said a presidential adviser, commenting on Washington's alleged eagerness to use Rwanda to push Wagner out of Africa.¹⁰⁵

Wagner itself may be stoking a rivalry with Rwanda. Kigali sees Wagner's hand in a statement by a Central African civil society organisation describing Rwandan troops as ineffective and urging Touadéra to review his agreements with Rwanda.¹⁰⁶ Wagner personnel reportedly also told young Central Africans at the Russian Cultural Centre in Bangui that the U.S. is using Rwanda to strengthen its influence in CAR.¹⁰⁷ Rwanda has not responded publicly to such accusations, but it fears that similar propaganda could spread.

These incidents show that Touadéra is often unable to control his partners' activities, with deleterious effects on peace and security in the country. They also confirm that, if Kigali wants to consolidate its position as a guarantor of stability on the continent, it should clearly focus its efforts in CAR on pacification rather than on economic interests.

IV. Defusing Risks

There are several moving pieces on the CAR chessboard – intensifying rebel attacks and uncertainty about Wagner's fate as the country's economic woes persist – but, with negotiation options lacking, Rwanda may be the strongest piece at hand for Bangui.¹⁰⁸ The presence of its generally well-regarded troops and diplomats has been helpful indeed. Yet both Kigali and Bangui would benefit from steps to pre-empt risks of conflict over natural resources or major-power competition in CAR.

The secrecy shown by Rwanda in cultivating its partnership with CAR could prove a liability for Kigali, tarnishing its reputation on the continent or elsewhere. The lack of communication about its activities sows doubt among Central Africans as to Rwandan intentions. Having seen foreigners repeatedly behave in predatory ways, the population understandably tends to be suspicious of every new external actor on the scene. Kigali risks being perceived as yet another foreign power propping up an autocrat to serve its own interests.

Greater transparency would help. Rwanda should explain the nature of its support for the Central African state, offering details of the military and economic agreements

¹⁰³ France persuaded other EU member states to make funds available for Rwanda's deployment in Mozambique, which is partly aimed at securing a large TotalEnergies gas project. Crisis Group interviews, EU officials, Brussels, June 2023.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Rwandan official, Kigali, February 2023. Crisis Group telephone interview, U.S. official, March 2023. "Les Etats-Unis engagent une stratégie pour évincer d'Afrique les mercenaires du groupe Wagner", *Le Monde*, 20 February 2023.

¹⁰⁵ Video statement by Fidèle Gouandjika, special adviser to Touadéra, Facebook, 4 March 2023.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interview, senior Rwanda Defence Force officer, Kigali, March 2023.

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group telephone interview, 13 April 2023.

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group telephone interview, observer of CAR affairs, 7 February 2023.

signed with Bangui and the actions taken to date. It should communicate more clearly its role in strengthening institutions and good governance in CAR. Spreading the news of its technical support for administrative and financial reform throughout the country, particularly by radio, would help Rwanda avoid causing frictions in CAR. Kigali could also organise visits for Central African and international journalists to its areas of operation in CAR, as they are doing in Mozambique.¹⁰⁹ The CAR government should likewise be more open about its agreements with Rwanda, the content of which has so far been secret. Parliament should be able to analyse these documents. The executive branch should also respect legislative authority over individual mining concessions, especially to Rwandan firms, in order to encourage the development of a formal mining sector.

These measures will also help Rwanda prevent another major crisis in CAR. In return for its valuable provision of security support, Kigali should press Touadéra to resume dialogue with CPC rebel leaders. The UN should encourage Kigali to help broker talks as well, since Rwandan troops deployed bilaterally have not been involved in fighting the CPC since 2021, which may make Rwanda a credible facilitator in the armed groups' eyes. In cooperation with MINUSCA, the bilaterally deployed Rwandan soldiers could subsequently help ensure that any agreement reached between the conflict parties sticks, with their continued presence acting as a deterrent to would-be spoilers.

Rwanda should strive to separate its military and economic activities in CAR, so as not to be seen as a predatory force and thus expose Rwandan entrepreneurs to violence. It should move the bulk of its bilaterally deployed units away from the sites of its various business ventures back to places where they are needed to enhance public safety. At the very least, Kigali's bilateral forces could extend their escorts to non-Rwandan businesspeople working in the same areas. Kigali naturally wishes to protect its nationals, but assigning most of its troops to guard Rwandan businesses and mining concessions diverts firepower that would be better used to make the Central African population more secure. As Rwanda prepares to begin training the Central African army, the time is right to clarify the objectives of its military support: Central Africans consider rebuilding the army a top priority in stabilising the country.

To help prevent local conflicts, Kigali should provide economic incentives, such as tax exemptions, to encourage Rwandan businessmen to invest in activities that benefit the CAR economy, particularly mining and agriculture, instead of engaging in predatory practices. Rwandan investors can ensure buy-in from rural Central Africans by employing more of them, following examples in the agricultural sector.¹¹⁰ Rwandan businesspeople should stay in regular contact with local authorities and traditional leaders (*chefferies*), in order to make sure their actions are clear to the population. These measures would reduce the risk of grievances festering that drive locals to commit acts of violence.

Bangui can help ward off local conflict by defusing tensions between its two main security partners: the Wagner Group and Rwanda's bilaterally deployed forces. Assuming that Wagner's operations in CAR continue after its revolt in Russia, as seems likely for the moment, President Touadéra should assign each of his allies distinct

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group telephone interview, senior Rwanda officer, June 2023.

¹¹⁰ As described in section II.C above, Central African middlemen often manage Rwandan-owned farms.

areas of operation in order to avoid overlap that could lead to confrontation, as well as to ensure that their interventions mesh well with the country's national defence plan.¹¹¹ For example, he could delineate a specific role for each of his partners in the training of the national security forces. He may find it difficult to persuade either partner to accept all these arrangements, given their economic interests on the ground, but he should try. It will help that Rwanda is already keen to avoid much contact with Wagner.

CAR's Western partners, particularly the U.S. and the EU, may also have a role to play. Should they decide to offer Rwanda financial support for its military mission in CAR, as they did in Mozambique, they should impose strict conditions on spending and on the tasks Rwandan soldiers carry out. Precedence should go to training the Central African army. This approach would build on the former EU training mission's work, improve security for the population and allow more humanitarian aid into the regions hit hardest by the conflict. The West should also avoid explicitly backing Kigali in any move to reduce Wagner's influence. If separate tasks are delineated as laid out above, supporting Rwanda's efforts to train the national army will not only benefit CAR but might also contribute to diminishing Wagner's influence without pushing Kigali into direct confrontation with the Russian force.

Both Bangui and Kigali would benefit from the above measures in several ways. Steady Rwandan investment could boost CAR's tax revenues. Should the government assess that it is also feeding economic growth, it could expand its partnership with Kigali. Rwanda, for its part, would profit materially, while polishing its reputation as a credible African security provider. Allocating specific areas of operation to Rwandan investors would also reduce the risks of conflict with Wagner and intercommunal strife.

V. Conclusion

Central Africans are largely supportive of Rwanda's presence, which appears overall to be helping their country. Kigali's troops are helping police the capital and strategic roads. Rwanda is trying to shore up the Central African state's institutions, and its businesses could create jobs and pour much-needed money into the faltering economy. Pitfalls lurk, but Kigali and Bangui can plot a course steering clear of them. Rwanda should try to revive dialogue between the government and the rebels. It should also be more open about its economic ambitions in CAR, in order to avoid being seen as a predatory force. Bangui and Kigali should also improve coordination so that Rwandan soldiers and Wagner mercenaries do not shoot at each other. These efforts are essential if the Rwanda-CAR partnership is to help ease CAR's crisis.

Bangui/Nairobi/Brussels, 7 July 2023

¹¹¹ "Timeline: How Wagner Group's revolt against Russia unfolded", Al Jazeera, 24 June 2023.

Appendix A: Key dates of Rwanda's growing role in the Central African Republic

January 2014

Rwanda's commitment began with the deployment of 850 soldiers as part of the mission first led by the African Union (AU).

April 2014

Opening of a UN multidimensional integrated stabilization mission in the Central African Republic (CAR), MINUSCA, which now hosts more than 2,000 Rwandan blue helmets and police officers.

September 2015

Rwandan blue helmet deployed as bodyguards for senior Central African politicians, including the head of state.

November 2016

Foundation of an association of Rwandan citizens in Bangui called Diaspora Isongo.

October 2019

First official visit of President Kagame to Bangui. The two countries signed five cooperation agreements, the details of which were not disclosed.

December 2020

Kigali sent nearly 1,000 soldiers to CAR at President Faustin-Archange Touadéra's urgent request as the rebels of the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC) threatened to attack Bangui.

January 2021

Rwandan bilateral troops, unrestricted by UN rules of engagement, helped repel the CPC alongside the Central African army and Wagner paramilitaries.

February 2021

Central African Minister of Foreign Affairs Sylvie Baïpo-Temon met Rwandan investors in Kigali and promised them advantages (such as obtaining Central African nationality) to encourage entrepreneurs to set up in CAR. The same month, Rwandair, the national Rwandan airline, began twice-weekly flights to Bangui.

August 2021

During CAR president's official visit to Kigali, Rwanda and CAR signed four new cooperation agreements concerning mining, transport development, CAR's security sector reform and economic planning. Rwanda also began supporting CAR's security sector reform.

September 2021

CAR's government and armed groups, with Rwanda and Angola serving as facilitator, agreed on a roadmap to resolve the crisis, signed in the Angolan capital Luanda. Touadéra had approached Rwanda, along with Angola in late 2020, because of international pressure to resume negotiations with the CPC.

February 2022

The UN secretary general named Valentine Rugwabisa, a Rwandan citizen, as his special representative in CAR (de facto MINUSCA chief).

May 2022

Kigali opened an embassy in Bangui, a visible symbol of increasing cooperation between the two countries.

June 2022

The World Bank appointed Guido Rurangwa, a Rwandan economist, as its representative for CAR.

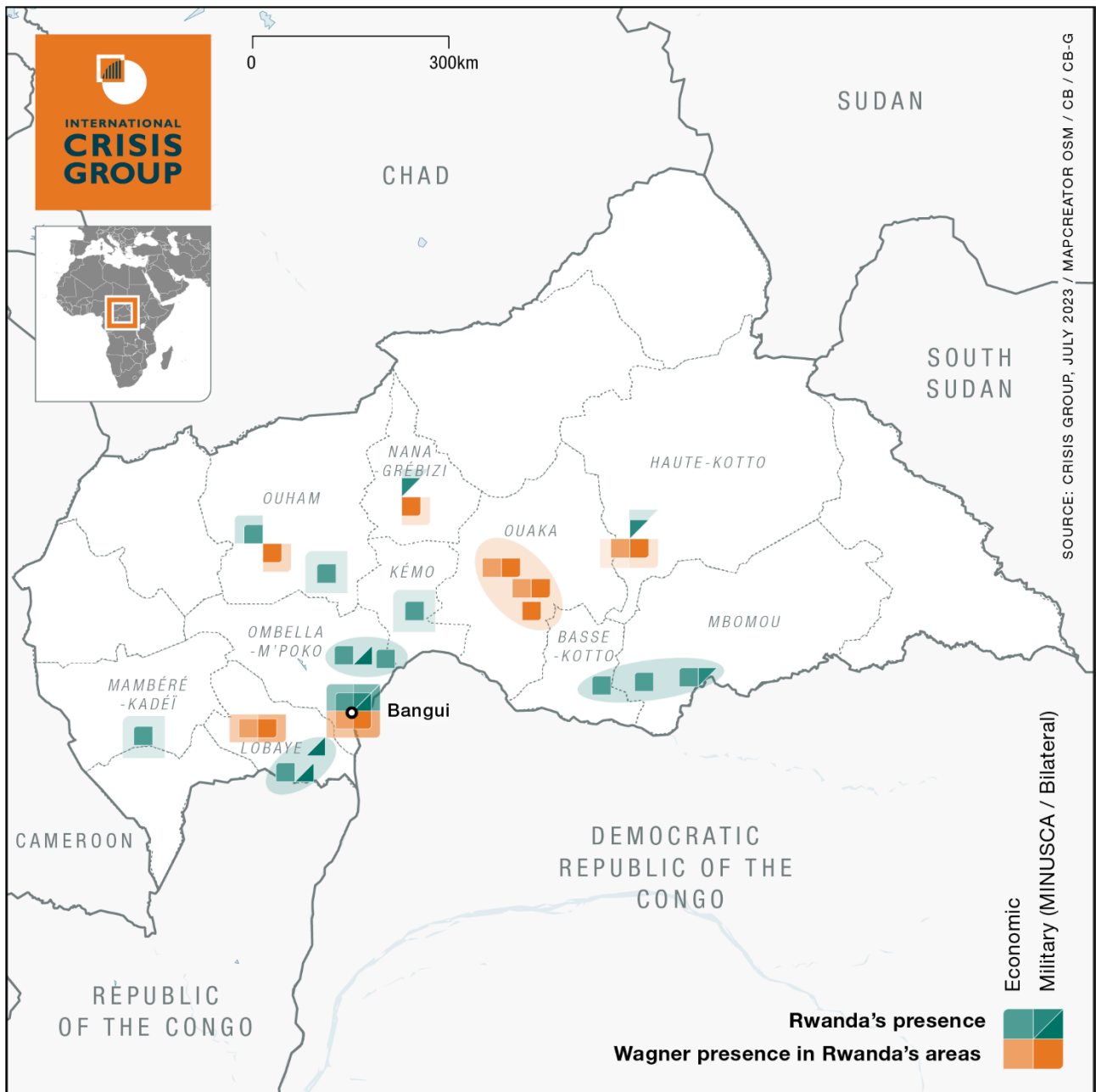
December 2022

In 2022, Rwandans established more companies in CAR than any other foreign citizens except Cameroonians. Some of these companies are controlled by Crystal Ventures, a holding owned by the Rwandan ruling party.

June 2023

President Touadéra went on an official visit to Kigali. James Kabarebe, former Rwandan defence minister and a close ally of Kagame, went on an official visit to Bangui.

Appendix B: Rwanda's multifaceted presence in the Central African Republic



Appendix C: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. The ideas, opinions and comments expressed by Crisis Group are entirely its own and do not represent or reflect the views of any donor. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australia (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade), Austria (Austrian Development Agency), Canada (Global Affairs Canada), Denmark (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), European Union (Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, Emergency Trust Fund for Africa), Finland (Ministry for Foreign Affairs), France (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency), Ireland (Department of Foreign Affairs), Japan (Japan International Cooperation Agency), Principality of Liechtenstein (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Luxembourg (Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs), The Netherlands (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), New Zealand (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade), Norway (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Qatar (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Republic of Korea (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Sweden (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Switzerland (Federal Department of Foreign Affairs), United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), United Kingdom (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office), United States Institute of Peace, and the World Bank.

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July 2023

Appendix D: Reports and Briefings on Africa since 2020

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COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch, Special Briefing N°4, 24 March 2020 (also available in French and Spanish).

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Nineteen Conflict Prevention Tips for the Biden Administration, United States Briefing N°2, 28 January 2021.

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Staving off Violence around Somalia's Elections, Africa Briefing N°163, 10 November 2020.

Blunting Al-Shabaab's Impact on Somalia's Elections, Africa Briefing N°165, 31 December 2020.

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