

## The Role of Al-Azhar Al-Sharif in Achieving National Reconciliation in Central African Republic



**C**entral African Republic is a landlocked country in Central Africa. It is bordered by Chad to the north, Sudan to the east, the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the south and Cameroon to the west. It covers a land area of about 620,000 square kilometers and its capital is Bangui. It has an estimated population of around 5 million, of which 60 % are Christians, between Protestants and Catholics, and 20% are Muslims, while the rest are between pagans and Baha'is.

Central African Republic gained its independence from France in 1960, and its two official languages are French and Sangho. Despite its significant mineral deposits and other resources, such as uranium reserves, crude oil, gold, diamonds, lumber, and hydro power, as well as significant quantities of arable land, the Central African Republic is among the ten poorest countries in the world.

Central African Republic is known for its ethnic and linguistic diversity, where it consists of eighty ethnic groups, each of which has its own language. The largest of all these groups are the Baya, Yakoma, Banda, M'Baka, Mboum, Mandija, and Fula. This is in addition to other European groups descending mainly from French origin. Also, its population includes two main groups of the black people namely: the Bantu and black Sudanese.

Most Muslim inhabitants live in the north, especially at the neighbouring borders of Chad and Sudan, where the first Islamic sultanate was established by the end of the seventeenth century after a number of Sultans of the Islamic kingdom of Baguirmi had departed to this area.

### The roots and developments of the crisis :

At the dawn of Thursday, December 5, 2013 the Anti-Balaka militias made coup d'état against the rule of president Michel Djotodia. Since then, they committed war crimes against Muslims, including burning people alive, mutilation, rape of women, burning houses, looting of property and the destruction of mosques. This caused the vast departure of tens of thousands of Muslims to the neighboring countries, particularly Chad, Sudan, Cameroon, and

the northern areas, and the rest of the Muslims gathered at the kilo 5 neighborhoods in the capital Bangui after they have departed leaving behind their homes and properties for their lives.

With the vast displacement of Muslims, Peter Bouckaert, Emergencies Director at Human Rights Watch, declared that entire neighborhoods for Muslims were abandoned, where their homes were demolished and taken in a systematic way. In this respect, the Secretary-General of the United Nations (Mr. Ban Ki-moon) called upon the African forces to exert more effort to prevent the commission of further atrocities, to protect civilians and to restore security as well as order. He, also, expressed his concerns that such violence might turn into genocide.

On December 9th, 2013 the French forces, in collaboration with the African forces, disarmed more than seven thousand Séléka rebel fighters and confined them to different military barracks in the capital, however their anti-militias were not disarmed.

In light of such intense and severe humanitarian situation, President of Chad, Idris Derby held an emergency meeting of the heads of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), with the presence of Michel Djotodia,

President of Central African Republic, and his transitional government on the 8th and 9th of January 2014 in the Chadian capital. In accordance to this meeting, it has been agreed upon the following:

- President Michel Djotodia and his Prime Minister Nicolas Tiangaye shall step down from power.
- Catherine Samba Panza, shall be elected as the mayor of Bangui during the transitional period for one year.
- Attacks of anti-Balaka militias on Muslims shall be ceased.

After Catherine Samba Panza had assumed power on January 23, 2014, the attacks against Muslims became less severe to some extent, and somehow a better atmosphere was created to call for national reconciliation. She, also, sent invitations to America, European Union countries, African Union countries, United Nations organizations, and many other international bodies and institutions, on top of which is "Al-Azhar", in order to help her to achieve such reconciliation. In this respect, Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar responded to this official request of the Central African authorities and agreed to send a delegation of Al-Azhar for this purpose.

Al-Azhar efforts to achieve national reconciliation:

Due to the gravity of the situation in Central Africa, Al-Azhar delega-

tion made a careful study of the situation there taking into account all its dimensions before traveling with the competent authorities. Al-Azhar delegation's efforts were obviously clear in its words and interventions during the forum sessions and its various committees in which it was keen to clarify the vision of Al-Azhar to get out of this crisis, by focusing on the following:

1. Al-Azhar under the leadership of Ahmed Al-Tayeb, the current Grand Imam and Sheikh of al-Azhar, spares no effort to meet all the humanitarian appeal and to give a helping hand worldwide until security and peace prevail among all human beings.
2. Egypt, president, government and people, stands ready to help the African brothers as much as it can, since Egypt is the big sister and has the leadership at the level of the entire continent.
3. Acceptance of the principle of dialogue as well as the proposal of visions and ideas quietly and in a civilized way.
4. The importance of dealing with others based on the concept of acceptance and mutual respect rather than that of exclusion and marginalization.
5. The belief in that any assault on Man is a crime against all humanity.
6. The exposure of Man to any form of oppression or racial discrimination because of religion, sex, color, language, or any other reason, is a crime against all humanity.
7. The respect for human dignity, freedom and faith as well as the freedom to practice religious rites.
8. Citizenship rights shall be guaranteed to All, where All people shall be equal before the law and court, and shall be equal in all rights and duties.
9. The diversity and differences among human beings in the beliefs, creeds, colors, languages and civilizations, are a divine will and one of the norms of God's law in the universe.
10. Such diversity and differences among humans came according to the various human needs that differ from age to age and from one environment to another, which lead to mutual understanding and integration, love and affection among all races of people, rather than conflicts, hatred and wars between people.
11. Tolerance and forgiveness are the characteristics of power and civilization regards of individuals and nations.
12. The achievement of religious tolerance among the people of one nation, has good impact on the prevalence of social peace, and

thus contributes effectively to the building of society as well as its progress and advancement.

13. Al-Azhar is ready to transfer its experience in the establishment of the Egyptian family home to the African brothers, to deepen the bonds of the national fabric between the people of one nation.

14. Reconciliation is a humanitarian necessity, but economic, social, political, cultural, psychological, religious, and security, cannot be indispensable as a first pillar in the progress of humanity.

The most important recommendations of the National Reconciliation Conference in Central Africa, as stated by the following committees

- Justice and Reconciliation Committee:
  - The need to promote and respect the constitutional provisions and fundamental freedoms of all the citizens of Central Africa, without any discrimination as regards age, sex, race or region.
  - The need to give the Muslim holidays in Central Africa an official form, in particular the Lesser Bairam (Eid ul-Fitr) and the Greater Bairam (Eid ul Adha).
  - Ensure freedom of belief and religious practice.
  - Set the rule of justice in litigation, ensure the application of

the criminal law to each and every person, and ensure just and fair trials.

- The need for the return of displaced persons and refugees in an atmosphere full of security and peace.
- Ensure freedom of movement all over the country.
- The need to make appropriate compensations whenever they are due.
- Judgment Committee:
  - The call for a referendum on a new constitution in addition free fair and transparent elections.
  - Propose a constitutional clause prohibiting any possibility for amnesty for crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide committed in Central African Republic.
  - Propose a constitutional provision that prohibits assuming power by force, and stipulates that political participation contradicts with the military status.
- Peace and Security Committee:
  - The need to commit armed groups firmly to consolidate democracy in the Central African Republic.
  - The need for immediate implementation of the national disarmament of fighters and the establishment of a resettlement program.

• **Economic and Social Development Committee:**

- The need to provide urgent humanitarian aids to victims of the recent crisis, and the establishment of a fund for social solidarity.
- The restoration of all basic social utilities, including schools, hospitals and health centers. And the provision of clean drinking water, adequate sanitation and social housing for all victims of the recent crisis in Central African Republic.
- Hold a genuine dialogue between all parties in order to ensure a respectable economic and social life.

**Notes:**

During the reception of Al-Azhar delegation, the President of the Central African Republic praised the role of Al-Azhar and the wise leadership of the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar in achieving such historic reconciliation. She, also, added saying that neither She nor her country "will ever forget this beautiful Al-Azhar, and Egypt, which such historic achievement would have never been possible without them."

All ministers of Central African Republic and its ambassadors, besides most of the delegations partici-

pating in the conference were keen to thank the delegation of Al-Azhar for its distinguished effort paid during the forum sessions and speeches, and which reached its peak in the reconciliation celebration session to the extent that everyone clapped warmly and continuously for a long time in appreciation of Al-Azhar delegation.

The President of Central African Republic, besides many ministers and leaders of civil society together with Islamic leaders cooperated in various religious, educational, relief and humanitarian fields.

As a divine reward for the participation of Al-Azhar delegation in the achievement of a real national reconciliation, the delegation heard on the next day the call to dawn prayer chanting out of undestroyed mosques that have not raised the call to prayer 'Adhan' since three years ago. This pleased the members of the delegation before their departure, and then received endless phone calls from all Muslim and non-Muslim leaders thanking gratefully Al-Azhar delegation for such great favour.

Al-Azhar delegation is the only Arab delegation participating in this conference.