

On the Front Line of Humanitarian Crises: Libya, Central Africa Republic and Syria

By Lena Lettau

Peter Bouchaert, the Emergencies Director from Human Rights Watch (HRW), spoke at a recent Castan Centre talk about his front-line humanitarian crisis experiences and the work of HRW in bringing global awareness and assistance to these conflicts. Joining him was Father Bernard Kinvi, a local Catholic priest from the Central African Republic (CAR), who explained his role in protecting citizens as his country broke into civil unrest in 2012.

Peter began by speaking of the inception of the HRW's 'emergency team' almost 20 years ago. This team, which Peter heads, has worked in locations ranging from Myanmar to Syria and has been particularly focussed on employing new technologies and social media in its bid to protect people and spread coverage of events. The use of satellite imagery, for example, has been pivotal in proving ethnic cleansing in Myanmar and verifying the location of footage emerging on social media from the Ukraine conflict, as well as compelling governments to act upon certain atrocities.

The focus of Peter's speech, however, was on the situation in the lesser known humanitarian crisis in CAR. The crisis began after a series of groups within the country rebelled against the corrupt leadership and each other, which has ultimately led to the Muslim community being particularly targeted.

Father Kinvi, an active voice in peace-keeping negotiations between the factions, spoke of the pivotal role he played in protecting the lives of the vulnerable Muslim community in his town when the violence erupted. At the time he opened the doors of his Catholic mission to over 1,500 people.

Peter and his team in CAR discovered Father Kinvi and the inhabitants of his mission and documented the situation, spreading pictures of the starving and confined Muslims on Twitter and other

social media sites, which led not only to a growing global awareness of the situation in CAR but also to a phone call from the UN Assistant-Secretary-General. This ultimately led, a few months later, to 12,000 UN peace-keeping troops arriving in CAR and the safe escort of the Muslim community to neighbouring Cameroon and Chad. The awareness raising work of HRW further led to medical provisions being provided through the WHO and Medicine Sans Frontiers, as well as other aid over time.

Both spoke also of the challenges facing CAR in gaining attention and assistance from the international community – drawing links between its isolation, poverty, and media mis-representation of the core issues underlying the conflict and the seriousness of the situation. They further pointed to the inadequacies of both the UN and other international bodies to respond to humanitarian crisis', both in CAR and in other countries, with forces largely hamstrung and support being either insufficient or coming too late.

Today, in CAR, over 10,000 people have been killed. The Muslim community has been completely displaced with little prospect of return and the country suffers the loss of essential services those communities provided. Corruption in the political elite remains. The key to moving forward, the speakers stressed, is to focus on the long-standing resource issues within the country, which are at the heart of the corruption issues, and to bring the perpetrators of the atrocities which have been committed to justice. To these ends, the International Criminal Court has begun an investigation into the CAR crisis and Father Kinvi, along with other religious leaders, is progressing in his dialogues with different factions, a process which will hopefully lead to lasting peace.

A video of this event is available on our [YouTube page](#).

'Foreign Fighters': the threats they pose and the means used to restrain them

By Lena Lettau

Professor Andrew Clapham addressed the phenomenon of 'foreign fighters' in a public lecture held by the Castan Centre earlier this year. The issue of 'foreign fighters' has come to a head in light of recent security measures being taken up by various governments to tackle the risks associated with nationals seeking to fight in foreign wars, especially those in Syria and Iraq. Most controversially this has included the cancellation and/or suspension of citizen's passports (at least as a temporary measure until further investigations have been made). Such a policy is used as a means of preventing someone from travelling to another country where it is suspected they may engage in fighting or as a means of preventing them from re-entering a country, if they are suspected of having already fought in a foreign conflict.

Professor Clapham pointed out that a key risk associated with 'foreign fighters' is that they might return from a conflict zone where

they experienced a degree of 'radicalization' and thus become a terrorist threat in their home country. A somber example of this was the apparent effects of radicalization on the perpetrators of the Charlie Hebdo attacks in France earlier this year.

A key focus of the lecture was on the international law and policy issues that such constraints on citizenship and 'foreign fighting' pose. A critical issue discussed was the implication of rendering a person stateless as a result of cancelling their passport. This is the necessary outcome where a person holds only one citizenship, and would put countries such as Australia in breach of their international obligations.

Professor Clapham further discussed the power of the Australian government to prosecute Australian 'foreign fighters' for crimes in other countries. He explained that Australian nationals can be prosecuted for wars crimes internationally, as well as for

breaches of domestic law abroad, so long as the permission of the Attorney General is given – he noted, however, that emphasis is placed on charging people simply on the grounds of having gone to fight in the first place.

The lecture also turned to broader questions in relation to 'foreign fighting', as it is a label that can be applied in numerous contexts. For instance, issues arise regarding the prosecution of foreigners in Guantanamo, alongside abuses by private security companies.

Andrew has a long and diverse history of human rights engagement, having worked for bodies such as the UN and Amnesty International, and now resides in Geneva where he is Professor of Public International Law at the Graduate Institute of International Development Studies.

A short Q&A video with Andrew is available on our [YouTube channel](#).