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Statement for the Record by
Most Reverend Nestor Désiré NONGO AZIAGBIA to the
United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Hearing on
U.S. Policy in Central Africa: The Imperatives of Good Governance
February 10, 2016

Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit my comments for the record. My name is Most Reverend Nestor Désiré NONGO AZIAGBIA, bishop of the Diocese of Bossangoa, in the Central African Republic and Vice President of the Central African Catholic Bishops' Conference.

I am a religious leader and pastor to my diocese of Bossangoa, with an average population of 700,000 people. I am writing now to the Committee on behalf of the people in my diocese and country to raise with you the issues that we are facing in CAR and to urge the United States to continue its leadership as a partner to the people of CAR to assist us to build a peaceful and prosperous country the inhabitants have been craving for.

The last time I came to the United States to testify before Congress was 2013, and we were in the middle of conflict between the Seleka and anti-balaka. At that time I laid before the subcommittee four requests. First, I urged you to help us stop the fighting, second, provide urgent humanitarian assistance, and third, help us assemble a transitional government that would lead to general elections to establish a new government whose legitimacy would be founded on the will of the people.

I am grateful to say that the United States responded to our call. Your assistance increased from \$18 million in FY 2011 to \$100 million in FY 2014. Not only did your assistance increase significantly, it responded to three of our requests. In 2011 your aid was mostly in the form of food commodities. In 2014 your assistance included food commodities, but also help and protection for refugees and internally displaced, increased diplomatic presence, agricultural aid, democracy promotion and peace building. Thanks to your assistance and that from other donor countries, the transitional government has been in place for just over two years. The first round of presidential elections took place with a huge mobilization of the population and the second round is scheduled for Sunday, February 14th. People are returning to their homes and villages, and the level of violence is down significantly.

I am also grateful that one reason we have less violence today is the extraordinary visit to CAR of the Holy Father Pope Francis in November last year. His courageous presence

among us and his inspiring visit to the central mosque in Bangui have contributed to a lessening of tensions by showing us all how to reach out to each other with humility and compassion, to overcome the boundaries of religion and ethnicity.

Yet much remains to be done and this leads me to my fourth request two years ago that I now bring to you again today. In 2013 I urged the United States to recognize that our people would need years of investments to rebuild government services, to reform and professionalize police and armed forces, to recognize the supremacy of civilian control. I also emphasized the urgent need to build civil society and faith-based groups so they can play their role of monitoring government actions and protecting the needs of our people. These are our needs today.

Throughout our history, the people of CAR have been left to their own devices to survive in a dysfunctional country ruled by a series of negligent governments and the intrusion of some sister countries. We lived in a nation where all three aspects of our society that are government, the private sector and civil society, the organized elements of the populace, were never allowed to flourish and create a peaceful and prosperous nation.

It is now time to build a new country out of the embers of our current crisis. To accomplish this goal, we need to reform all three aspects of our society. Good governance cannot be achieved by strengthening government alone. Good governance needs a strong, yet just, accountable, transparent and responsive government. Good governance requires a vibrant, free, fair and regulated private sector. Most importantly, good governance requires a civil society that is empowered by the protection of its civil rights to organize and protect the interests of the people, the ultimate seat of power in a democracy. We call on the United States, a real beacon of liberty and freedom, to join us to build a new CAR.

This task will be a difficult one. Since independence, our government elites operated on the general philosophy of extracting and monopolizing access to our country's natural resource wealth and using it to control government. Government services were less about serving the common good of society, than exploiting government like business centers extracting rental income from people who needed safe streets, health care, their children educated, or businesses started. Judicial services sold decisions to the highest bidder. Police and soldiers used their posts to extract income from the very people they were supposed to protect.

At the top levels of government, the goal was the massive accumulation of wealth used for personal purposes. Wealth was used also to hold onto power by distributing it as patronage to buy supporters and co-opt opponents. The army and police were often employed to deal with people who could not be co-opted. This same income served to distort and prevent the development of a free and inclusive democratic system. Funds were used to defraud and corrupt the electoral systems and made a mockery of the democratic process. Opposition political leaders were either bought off, intimidated or jailed in order to minimize political alternatives. At the bottom levels of government, officials used their positions to sell services in order to survive when salaries went unpaid for months, if not years.

This dysfunctional situation led to an entrenched political elite and crushing economic and social poverty. Opposition groups had no recourse and used this excuse to turn to armed violence leading to numerous coup d'états to gain access to political power and the natural resource wealth that came with it.

If the CAR is to build a peaceful and prosperous country, we must first reform government to manage our natural resources income for the common good of all CAR citizens. We must establish new systems that ensure total government transparency and accountability. Mining contracts, the revenue that flows from them and government allocations of funding to all ministries should be monitored and controlled by a new set of open and inclusive structures that issue regular public financial reports on all income and allocations across the government. The government and civil society should establish guidelines on what percentage of revenues are to be spent on health, education, infrastructure, military and other government services. Significant funding should be devolved to the provinces. These structures should include mechanisms that render justice when government officials violate guidelines and the law as well as a special anti-corruption body to produce campaigns against corruption and root it out where it occurs. These new watchdog structures should include government officials, members from civil society, faith-based groups and international advisers.

Throughout our past, government in CAR has always been dominated by the elite in the executive branch. Natural resource wealth was used to elect and control a national assembly that was pliant to the will of the presidency. Our wealth was also used to appoint and co-opt our judicial structures to ensure that their judgements never overturned executive actions, tried executive violations of the constitution, or civil rights and never threatened the elite that controlled the executive branch.

Although it is still difficult to establish a healthy legislative body, we urge you to remain relentless in your support to the establishment of a strong national assembly that can stand up to the executive branch and to truly represent the interests of all people in CAR. We also urge you to help us build a judiciary that watches over the other two branches of government as the final arbiter for justice and the civil rights of the entire population.

In order to build economic prosperity, CAR needs to implement the existing set of laws, strengthen the institutions and guidelines to create a fertile environment where the private sector can flourish, create wealth, good jobs and a society that is productive and allows all people to make a fair and just living. Government needs to learn how to establish regulatory systems that are conducive to free enterprise and protect our people from labor abuse, market fraud and distortions and environmental destruction. Special financial and business promotion programs need to target people living in poverty in the rural and urban centers of our country to ensure that they can create small businesses and make their way out poverty.

Most importantly, we urge the United States to partner with the best of American civil society and faith-based groups to help us build a vibrant and powerful civil society capable of monitoring government and business activities, identifying and redressing human rights abuses and promoting the interests of all citizens. A healthy civil society also requires a free press, regulations that promote the easy creation of free associations, unions, political parties and non-governmental organizations. This third leg of a healthy society is often the most neglected and underdeveloped. In Africa, civil society, the press and various associations have been oppressed in order to stifle free speech and loyal opposition groups. Their resulting absence or frailty allows a strong, negligent government and a corrupt, unregulated private sector to violate civil rights and corrupt free and fair markets and the democratic process.

In addition to building government, the private sector and civil society, over half of our people live in poverty. Our country will need financial assistance to continue humanitarian assistance where needed and promote the long term integral human development of our people. We must provide good health care, education for our children, agricultural aid to

increase food production and micro-enterprise inputs to restart small retail commerce and marketing.

As you develop longer term programs to help CAR build a new society, we urge you in the strongest terms to help our society to team up with American civil society and faith-based groups to build a strong and vibrant civil society and promote integral human development in CAR. We have never enjoyed such privileges and have suffered terribly because of their absence.

For decades during times of chaos and during the recent transition period, the Catholic Church stood as virtually the only national institution still functioning in my country. In my diocese alone, we run 54 schools and seven social welfare centers. During the fighting, my staff and I organized care for over 50,000 people. The Church Caritas institutions have mobilized assistance from international organizations like Caritas Internationalis and Catholic Relief Services to help assist those in CAR who were internally displaced, to provide seeds, tools, food to communities and assistance to rebuild homes. We helped communities to develop safety and security plans, to provide early warning of LRA movements and help people avoid attacks.

Further, the Catholic Church united with the President of the Central African Islamic Community and the President of the Evangelical Churches in a religious platform worked tirelessly to call for an end to the violence CAR experienced in recent years and to promote reconciliation. Together we traveled throughout Europe and to the United States on several occasions to give a voice to the people of CAR so that the international community may come to their aid. Church leaders have been key members of committees that helped establish the transitional government and then offer it advice in its efforts to stop violence and prepare the election of a new government.

With assistance from USAID and the Global Development Alliance and Catholic Relief Services, the Catholic Church, the Evangelical Association and the Muslim Community have started a program to promote long term sustainable justice, peace and reconciliation. It is our hope that this crucial program will help us bind up and heal the terrible wounds that people have suffered during the recent fighting, but also during the decades of repressive and predatory government.

I am writing now to the Committee to thank you for bringing attention to the situation faced by the people in CAR. Too often my country is forgotten among the many global needs worldwide and I wish to acknowledge that you have not forgotten us.

In closing, I would like to add to the appeal that I launched in my testimony two years ago. Hence I urged you to be a modern day Good Samaritan to the Central African people. The people of CAR are grateful that you answered this challenge. You picked us up from the road and have offered us the means to treat our wounds and heal.

Today I urge you to rally the international community to help us rebuild from our civil strife to create a new country. The United States is uniquely well placed to help us in this task. You are a country and a people who, many years ago, fought your own civil war to establish freedom from slavery and build a better union. You also know how long it took to ensure that African Americans could exercise their civil rights. It is those victories that reunited you as one nation to rise to the world power that you are today. I ask you now to help us tend to what

Abraham Lincoln called “our unfinished work...that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom”.

I pray that the United States will stand with CAR and help us rebuild a new, free and democratic nation that serves all our people.

Respectfully Submitted by: Most Reverend Nestor Désiré NONGO AZIAGBIA

