

A Safer World For The Truth

*Telling The Story:  
Remembering Elisabeth  
Blanche Olofio*



In memory of Igor Acko



## **A Safer World For The Truth**

A Safer World for the Truth is a collaborative initiative of Free Press Unlimited, the Committee to Protect Journalists and Reporters without Borders. A Safer World for the Truth works towards the pursuit of justice for crimes committed against journalists. The project consists of a series of investigations of cases where a journalist was murdered for doing his or her job. The aim of these investigations is to bring new facts and information around the killings to light, paving the way for pursuing justice.



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# Abbreviations

**ARC** — *Association de Radios Communautaires de Centrafrique*

**CAR** — Central African Republic

**CEDAD** — *Comité extraordinaire pour la défense des acquis démocratiques*

**CPC** — Coalition of Patriots for Change

**CPJ** — Committee to Protect Journalists

**CPJP** — *Convention des Patriots pour la Justice et la Paix*

**CPSK** — *Convention Patriotique pour le Salut de Kodro*

**DDR** — Disarmament, Demobilisation and Rehabilitation

**FACA** — *Forces Armées Centrafricaines*

**FPRC** — *Front Populaire pour la Renaissance de la Centrafricaine*

**HRW** — Human Rights Watch

**MINUSCA** — United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in the Central African Republic

**RSF** — Reporters without Borders

**SCC** — Special Criminal Court

**TJRRC** — Truth, Justice, Reparations, and Reconciliation Commission

**UFDR** — *Union des Forces Démocratiques pour la Rassemblement*

# Executive summary

Elisabeth Blanche Olofio was a community journalist in the Central African Republic (CAR), who worked for a Catholic community radio station called *Radio Be Oko* (“One Heart”). As a direct consequence of her work as a journalist, on 5 January 2013, Elisabeth was targeted; she was severely beaten, tortured and raped by Séléka rebels in her hometown of Bambari. At the time, Elisabeth was providing her community with crucial information on the ongoing rebel advance. Due to the severity of her injuries, she had to be transferred to the capital Bangui for urgent medical assistance. It was during the rebel occupation of Bangui, and over a period of a year and a half, that Elisabeth endured severe psychological and physical trauma. Unable to escape the country to receive the necessary medical care, in June 2014 at the age of 34, Elisabeth died from her injuries.

Local citizen journalists, like Elisabeth, who often lack the resources for training, equipment and protective measures, routinely report in dangerous circumstances. They play a significant role in reporting about conflicts to both their communities and international audiences. In some cases, they are the only source of information in a region. For that very reason, local citizen journalists are often targeted by warring parties, wanting to silence them.

Our investigation team reviewed photographic evidence, official documents and archived e-mail conversations, and interviewed more than thirty witnesses and experts with the aim of uncovering the true story behind the attack on Elisabeth Blanche Olofio. Through Elisabeth Blanche Olofio’s story, *A Safer World for the Truth* brings attention to the dangers that local journalists working in conflict zones face. The report will reveal who was probably responsible for Elisabeth’s torture, rape and murder, how those responsible have evaded justice ever since, and the suffering Elisabeth endured for one and a half years as a result of the attack.

The attack on Elisabeth and its aftermath are illustrative of a systemic problem in states experiencing civil conflict, particularly in the Central African Republic (CAR). At this time of volatile civil unrest, media organisations and journalists face significant threats. Attacks against them are rarely investigated, and justice is therefore almost never served. It has been known for over nine years that Séléka rebels carried out the attack on Elisabeth, yet to date, no official investigation has been instigated. In the meantime, the victim and several key eyewitnesses have died, the main suspects have gone missing or died, and crucial evidence has been lost or destroyed. As a result, the chance of achieving justice for Elisabeth has diminished drastically.

This investigation finds credible allegations that Elisabeth Blanche Olofio investigated a story of embezzlement of funds that were meant for the restoration of the Michel Maitre school on the Catholic Diocese’s premises in Bambari. In retaliation, Bishop Edouard Mathos of Bambari personally and severely threatened Elisabeth during a work meeting with Radio Be Oko staff. Rumours of the incident and the investigation spread quickly through the town. Partly based on these rumours, Elisabeth was later identified as an investigative journalist and targeted by the Séléka rebels. A local youth called Oyoh, betrayed her. He told the Séléka rebels that Elisabeth had returned from hiding and subsequently revealed her location. Oyoh, who has never been questioned, allegedly still resides in Bambari.

Furthermore, our investigation discovered that Séléka rebels in four Toyota Landcruiser vehicles went to look for Elisabeth. Rebel fighters under the command of either General Tom Adam or Colonel Méa, found Elisabeth at her godmother Augustine’s house. For several hours, she was severely beaten, tortured and raped by Séléka rebels until unconscious, and left for dead. Her body was covered in abrasions and parts were swollen; she lost a lot of blood through her ears and nose, and when she woke up, she was unable to move her legs.

Unable to receive adequate medical care in Bambari, Elisabeth moved to Bangui with her two children at the end of February 2013. In Bangui, she slowly began to recover from her severe physical and psychological injuries until the Séléka rebels marched on the capital on 24 March 2013. During the rebel occupation of Bangui, her condition deteriorated sharply. She got caught in the middle of a turbulent city where militias roamed the streets,

and was too afraid to go to the hospital regularly. Instead of getting better, Elisabeth gradually got worse. Her psychological and physical injuries could not be treated adequately in Bangui, and the continued presence of the Séléka, combined with the regular sound of gunfire, severely aggravated her trauma. Plans to evacuate her to a safe environment outside of CAR failed because there were issues with her official documentation. After a year and a half of suffering, Elisabeth succumbed to her injuries in June 2014.

In light of the above, the report concludes that the Special Criminal Court (SCC) should immediately open an investigation into crimes against journalists, including Elisabeth Blanche Olofio, committed by warring parties in CAR since 2012. Furthermore, there are significant shortcomings in the capabilities and willingness of the international community, to protect (local) journalists and prevent and investigate crimes against them in states experiencing conflict that have limited capacity and resources to do so themselves.

This report therefore closes with the following concrete recommendations:

*To the competent judicial authorities:*

1. **The Prosecutor of the Special Criminal Court should immediately open an investigation into crimes against journalists committed by all warring parties in the Central African Republic since 2012.** The impact of a journalist killed goes beyond the killing itself, since it has a far-reaching effect on people's access to information, which is especially crucial during times of conflict. The Prosecutor's overarching investigation should include an investigation into the attack, torture and rape of Elisabeth Blanche Olofio, which took place in January 2013. Specifically, this investigation should be directed at the roles played by (Ex) Séléka General Tom Adam, also known as 'General Bin Laden', Séléka Colonel Méa, Bishop Edouard Mathos and 'Oyoh'. All investigations should pay specific attention to the chain of command.

*To the Government of the Central African Republic:*

2. **Commit to and strictly abide by UNSC Resolution 1738 (2006) and 2222 (2015), and implement the UN Plan of Action on the safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity (2012).** Article 7 of UNSC Resolution 1738 and Article 5 of UNSC Resolution 2222, emphasise CAR's obligations under international law, to end impunity and to prosecute those responsible for serious violations of international humanitarian law.

*To the International Community:*

3. **States are urged to introduce a new emergency visa for journalists at risk, including granting a visa to immediate family members of the journalists at risk.** This is in line with the 'Report on Providing Safe Refuge for Journalists at Risk' by the Independent High-Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom. This report argues that an emergency visa, paired with stronger care after (temporary) relocation, can prevent the murders of journalists or the severe physical and psychological effects of attacks and threats, as occurred in the case of Elisabeth, against them. When attempting to acquire visas, journalists in distress, especially local journalists, often experience obstacles, resulting in serious risks to their safety. Most notably, they experience delays in their visa procedure, the criminalization of journalistic activities preventing them from acquiring a visa, post-relocation threats and issues, and are unable to resume their work. Such visas should be available to the relatively small group of journalists from across the world who are in mortal danger and apply for this support.

As aptly put in the report of the High-Level Panel: *"Leaving their home countries, at least while a threat to their safety exists, is all too often the only way for these journalists to avoid politically motivated harassment, kidnapping, incarceration, violence or even assassination. It is not a decision taken lightly, nor is it one motivated by a desire to relocate permanently: the wish to move is driven by necessity."* This emergency visa would fill a significant gap in the current regime for safe relocation. In particular, journalists under imminent threat should be able to move to safety quickly and securely, yet the current pathways do not provide this recourse.

4. **Support the call for an independent International Investigative Task Force.** An independent International Investigative Task Force can provide a key entry point for justice in contexts where corruption, weak institutions, or a lack of resources impede investigations by national authorities. The Task Force should consist of investigative, forensic and legal experts who will be deployed to crime scenes or provide

other forms of support to national investigators. Ideally this instrument should be established by the United Nations, as originally proposed by former UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Killings, Agnès Callamard. States should support this initiative and contribute to the Task Force with funding, a roster of experts that can be called upon, diplomatic support, and advocacy. Especially those member States of the Media Freedom Coalition and signatories of the Global Pledge on Media Freedom.

5. **Support the call for the establishment of a new Special Representative of the UN Secretary General for the Safety of Journalists** so that the Secretary General, UN General Assembly and Security Council can more effectively engage in advancing accountability for crimes against journalists. Appointed by the Secretary-General, the Special Representative's mandate should include following up on the progress of investigations into attacks on journalists and fostering cooperation with the competent national authorities. In the case of Elisabeth Blanche Olofio, a UN Special Representative could have pushed Central African authorities to assist with Elisabeth's evacuation, and urged the Democratic Republic of Congo to issue a visa to facilitate Elisabeth's trip to Panzi Hospital in Bukavu.
  
6. **In close collaboration with International NGOs, start exploring the creation and implementation of an 'Alert Database' where journalists and their relatives and colleagues, and members of civil society can collect and store evidence (photos, video, text messages, documents, etc.) concerning threats against and attacks on journalists.** Too often, crucial evidence and testimonies are lost over time, especially where it takes years to investigate crimes against journalists. Providing relatives and colleagues with a system to collect and upload evidence and testimonies of attacks on journalists can help NGOs and the international community to better monitor those attacks and provide adequate emergency, legal, and security assistance.

# 1. Context of the attack: Turmoil in the Central African Republic

The Central African Republic (CAR) has been experiencing insecurity for decades, particularly in the north east of the country where much of the country's sizable Muslim minority is based. Bordering Sudan, Chad and South Sudan, the north east of CAR formed a "Darfurised" periphery where foreign rebels, local armed groups and traffickers fought for control of diamond and other mineral-producing areas.<sup>1</sup> It has thus been the country's main "grey zone" for years.<sup>2</sup> The local armed groups operating in this area have long been part of CAR's security environment, playing a decisive role throughout CAR's history.

Since Ange-Félix Patassé won the presidential elections in 1993, CAR experienced several attempted but successful coups, and rebel insurrections. François Bozizé, one of Patassé's generals, organised a coup, which failed, against him in 2001. Bozizé subsequently fled to Chad with troops loyal to him, and launched a successful attack from the north of the country in 2003 in which he managed to overthrow Patassé.<sup>3</sup> President Bozizé was unable to restore the authority of the state and exert control over all its territory. At most, the Central African Republic's Army (FACA) only controlled an area of 100km around Bangui.<sup>4</sup>

The 'Central African Republic Bush War' that broke out between Bozizé and several armed groups from the north of the country in the aftermath of the 2003 coup was brought to an end in 2007-2008 by the signing of the '2007 Birao Peace Agreement' and the '2008 Libreville Comprehensive Peace Agreement'.<sup>5</sup> The agreements, which set out an amnesty programme for rebel forces and provided a broader Disarmament, Demobilisation and Rehabilitation (DDR) programme, failed because of inadequate implementation by the government of CAR.<sup>6</sup> Non-state actors, particularly those from the north of the country, were severely disappointed in the state.

The disappearance in January 2010 of rebel leader Charles Massi of the *Convention des Patriotes pour la Justice et la Paix* (CPJP), which was operating in the north-eastern part of the country, exacerbated tensions between the government and northern-based rebel groups. The allegedly rigged presidential elections of January 2011, and the death of former President Patassé, further solidified frustrations in large segments of the population in the north of the country and reinforced their determination to put an end to Bozizé's regime.<sup>7</sup> This resulted in the creation of the Séléka coalition in 2012 and paved the way for their military advance.

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1 International Crisis Group (11 June 2013). *Central African Republic: Priorities of the Transition*. <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/central-african-republic-priorities-of-the-transition.pdf>.

2 International Crisis Group (11 June 2013). *Central African Republic: Priorities of the Transition*. <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/central-african-republic-priorities-of-the-transition.pdf>.

3 African Arguments (15 January 2013). *Central African Republic: The collapse of the Bozize regime*. <https://africanarguments.org/2013/01/15/central-african-republic-the-collapse-of-the-bozize-regime-by-francois-misser/>.

4 African Arguments (15 January 2013). *Central African Republic: The collapse of the Bozize regime*. <https://africanarguments.org/2013/01/15/central-african-republic-the-collapse-of-the-bozize-regime-by-francois-misser/>.

5 Hilary Matfess (13 May 2015). *History shows that the peace agreement in the Central African Republic probably won't stick*. <https://qz.com/403428/history-shows-that-the-peace-agreement-in-the-central-african-republic-probably-wont-stick/>.

6 Lesley Anne Warner (26 March 2013). *Flawed Peace Process Lead to Greater Unrest in the Central African Republic*. <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/12820/flawed-peace-process-leads-to-greater-unrest-in-the-central-african-republic>.

7 African Arguments (15 January 2013). *Central African Republic: The collapse of the Bozize regime*. <https://africanarguments.org/2013/01/15/central-african-republic-the-collapse-of-the-bozize-regime-by-francois-misser/>.



## Rise and Fall of the Séléka Coalition – Continued Insecurity

The Séléka coalition was formed between August and December 2012 in the north of CAR, with an agreement between three major armed groups, namely the *Union des Forces Démocratiques pour la Rassemblement* (UFDR), *Convention Patriotique pour le Salut de Kodro* (CPSK) and *Convention des Patriots pour la Justice et la Paix* (CPJP),<sup>8-9</sup> that had previously fought against the government in Bangui.<sup>10</sup> Their grievances included decades of political and economic persecution and marginalisation, President Bozizé's family's tight grip on power<sup>11</sup>, and broken promises of peace deals.<sup>12</sup> Many of the original coalition commanders were 'Big Men' of the northern economy, who were fighting to increase their control of the country's vast resources.<sup>13</sup> These Big Men had been part of CAR's political and security landscape since the previous war in 2004. When the movement started, the vast majority of Séléka members were loyal to these Big Men from the north east of the country.<sup>14</sup>

Séléka elements profited from the power vacuum left by the state in the north of the country, and set up the coalition in 2012. But even though the coalition temporarily brought together rebel elements with a common goal, the Séléka coalition was reported to be a seriously fragile coalition<sup>15</sup>, lacking a centralised chain of command or ideology.<sup>16-17</sup> The objectives were primarily economic but became political after the rebels realised how weak Bozizé's army was.<sup>18-19</sup> This coalition of armed groups has therefore been described as an 'unlikely and heterogeneous alliance of convenience'.<sup>20</sup>

In December 2012, the Séléka coalition initiated a military advance in the north of the country and captured the cities of Ndélé, Ouadda and Sam Ouandja. On 23 December 2012, Séléka rebels staged an attack on Bambari, Elisabeth Olofio's hometown, approximately 400 kilometres north east from Bangui. Sources reported that Bambari was captured with very little resistance from the FACA on 23<sup>21</sup> or 24 December 2012.<sup>22</sup> Telephone contact with Bambari was no longer possible because the Séléka cut the landlines and cell phone reception was non-existent outside of Bambari at the time.<sup>23-24</sup> Radio Ndeke Luka reported the execution of a trader in Kaga

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8 Human Rights Watch (18 September 2013). *"I Can Still Smell the Dead" The Forgotten Human Rights Crisis in the Central African Republic*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/09/18/i-can-still-smell-dead/forgotten-human-rights-crisis-central-african-republic>.

9 *Union des Forces Démocratiques pour la Rassemblement* (UFDR), *Convention Patriotique pour le Salut de Kodro* (CPSK), and *Convention des Patriots pour la Justice et la Paix* (CPJP), and to a lesser extent the Union of Republican Forces (UFR) and the Alliance for the Rebirth and Rebuilding (A2R).

10 Emily Mellgard (29 January 2015). *What is the Seleka?* <https://institute.global/policy/what-Séléka>.

11 International Crisis Group (11 June 2013). *Central African Republic: Priorities of the Transition*. <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/central-african-republic-priorities-of-the-transition.pdf>.

12 Emily Mellgard (29 January 2015). *What is the Seleka?* <https://institute.global/policy/what-Séléka>.

13 Emily Mellgard (29 January 2015). *What is the Seleka?* <https://institute.global/policy/what-Séléka>.

14 Emily Mellgard (29 January 2015). *What is the Seleka?* <https://institute.global/policy/what-Séléka>.

15 Sián Herbert, Nathalia Dukhan, and Marielle Debos (July 2013). *State Fragility in the Central African Republic: What prompted the 2013 coup?* [http://www.gsdr.org/docs/open/car\\_gsdr2013.pdf](http://www.gsdr.org/docs/open/car_gsdr2013.pdf).

16 International Crisis Group (11 June 2013). *Central African Republic: Priorities of the Transition*. <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/central-african-republic-priorities-of-the-transition.pdf>.

17 Interview with ICG expert 8 December 2020.

18 International Crisis Group (11 June 2013). *Central African Republic: Priorities of the Transition*. <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/central-african-republic-priorities-of-the-transition.pdf>.

19 Interview with ICG expert 8 December 2020.

20 Kewir, K. J. & Emile, S. (2016). Building Peace in the Central African Republic. *Asian Journal of Research in Social Sciences and Humanities*, 6-1, pp. 41-59.

<https://allafrica.com/download/resource/main/main/idatcs/00121643:981c602ee1c38d3e0df484cea7f7be7f1.pdf>.

21 Radio Ndeke Luka (23 December 2012). *Séléka repousse les FACA et assiège Bambari*.

<https://www.radiondekeluka.org/actualites/securite/13009-séléka-repousse-les-faca-et-assiège-bambari.html>.

22 BBC (23 December 2012). *Rebels in Central African Republic take city of Bambari*.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-20833943>.

23 Radio Ndeke Luka (23 December 2012). *Séléka repousse les FACA et assiège Bambari*.

<https://www.radiondekeluka.org/actualites/securite/13009-séléka-repousse-les-faca-et-assiège-bambari.html>.

24 Marion Baudry, Susanna Brown & Alain Lapiere (3 to 6 May 2013). *Report of Rapid Assessment Ouaka (Grimari, Bambari, Ippy)*.

[https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/CAR\\_Rapid%20Assessment\\_Ouaka\\_May2013.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/CAR_Rapid%20Assessment_Ouaka_May2013.pdf).

Bandoro caught photographing Séléka troops: “For Séléka, the fact that this trader took a photo of the group constitutes espionage.”<sup>25</sup> One of the only sources of communication between Bambari and Bangui was Bishop Edouard Mathos of Bambari, who was occasionally permitted to travel back and forth once.<sup>26</sup>

At the beginning of the rebellion, most combatants and military commanders were members of or loyal to the UFDR, CPJP or CPSK<sup>27</sup>, and at the start of their advance, the Séléka coalition numbered approximately 6,000 fighters.<sup>28</sup> During the march to Bangui they were joined by different forces from the region.<sup>29</sup> The movement’s ranks filled with young people from the centre of the country and the capital.<sup>30</sup> These local young people often helped Séléka rebels, once the rebels entered a village or city, by pointing out Central African state officials, traders, businessmen and, in some cases, journalists.<sup>31-32</sup>

On 24 March 2013, after a two-month cessation of hostilities, the Séléka coalition captured the capital Bangui. For the first time in CAR’s history, forces coming from the largely Muslim population in the north held power in the capital.<sup>33</sup> The rebels, not satisfied with the rewards their new positions in government offered them, increased their looting efforts and violence against the mostly Christian population, particularly in Bangui.<sup>34</sup> In response to the Séléka attacks, Christian self-defense militias, known as Anti-Balaka, formed throughout the country; they often targeted the Muslim civilian population in retaliation.<sup>35</sup> The result was a cycle of intercommunal violence, which the Séléka government was unable to contain. Under severe international pressure, the Séléka coalition’s leader, Michel Djotodia, stepped down in 2014. This resulted in the Séléka coalition splintering into multiple armed groups that are still prevalent across CAR today.

These armed groups, commonly called the Ex-Séléka, have since fought the Anti-Balaka, international forces and each other, over leadership rivalries, financial disagreements and strategic differences.<sup>36</sup> By the end of 2014, following a ceasefire agreement signed in Brazzaville, the country was effectively partitioned between Anti-Balaka forces in the south west, and Ex-Séléka in the north east.<sup>37</sup> Since then, the increased deployment of UN, French, and Rwandan troops, supplemented with Russian mercenaries, has created a volatile stalemate whereby key cities such as Bambari are reasonably safe but the countryside is dominated by Ex-Séléka and Anti-Balaka groups.<sup>38</sup> To illustrate, after the general election in December 2020, various Ex-Séléka groups joined forces with Anti-Balaka groups to form the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC).<sup>39</sup> This coalition, led by former president Bozizé and Séléka general Nouredine Adam, marched on Bangui and took several key towns in the

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25 Radio Ndeke Luka (24 December 2012). *Un commerçant abattu par des rebelles à Kabo*.

<https://www.radiondekeluka.org/actualites/securite/13026-un-commer%C3%A7ant-abattu.html>.

26 Interview 3, April 2021.

27 International Crisis Group (11 June 2013). *Central African Republic: Priorities of the Transition*.

<https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/central-african-republic-priorities-of-the-transition.pdf>.

28 Emily Mellgard (29 January 2015). *What is the Seleka?* <https://institute.global/policy/what-Séléka>.

29 International Crisis Group (11 June 2013). *Central African Republic: Priorities of the Transition*.

<https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/central-african-republic-priorities-of-the-transition.pdf>.

30 International Crisis Group (11 June 2013). *Central African Republic: Priorities of the Transition*.

<https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/central-african-republic-priorities-of-the-transition.pdf>.

31 Réseau des Journalistes pour les Droits de l’Homme en République centrafricaine (17 January 2013). *Bambari: Des Victimes Témoignent Leur Vécu*. <https://reseaudesjournalistesrca.wordpress.com/2013/01/17/bambari-des-victimes-temoignent-leur-vecu/>.

32 Interview 2, 28 April 2021.

33 International Crisis Group (21 September 2015). *Central African Republic: The Roots of Violence*.

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/central-african-republic/central-african-republic-roots-violence>.

34 Human Rights Watch (10 May 2013). *Central African Republic: Rampant Abuses After Coup*.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/05/10/central-african-republic-rampant-abuses-after-coup>.

35 International Crisis Group (21 September 2015). *Central African Republic: The Roots of Violence*.

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/central-african-republic/central-african-republic-roots-violence>.

36 Idem.

37 Ty McCormick (28 October 2015). *‘One Day, We Will Start a Big War’: Outgunned by powerful rebel in the Central African Republic, the U.N. can’t even protect civilians. Now it’s pushing for early elections that could destroy a fragile peace*.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/10/28/one-day-we-will-start-a-big-war-central-african-republic-un-violence/>.

38 Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (31 May 2021). *Central African Republic*.

<https://www.globalr2p.org/countries/central-african-republic/>.

39 Idem.

process, before being pushed back at the outskirts of Bangui and splintering once again.<sup>40</sup> Recently, the FACA, in collaboration with international forces, managed to push large parts of the CPC further away from Bangui.<sup>41</sup> Continued insecurity in CAR may easily result in another round of fighting, and the government requires ongoing international assistance to stabilise the country.<sup>42</sup>

## Operational Structure of the Séléka

The Séléka coalition was organised into units and 'Com-Zones'. Generally, Séléka generals and colonels commanded their own groups and zones, and so-called 'zone commanders' were appointed. Each local zone commander was assigned an area from which he was responsible for extracting economic value for himself and, in part, his hierarchy, through taxation and trade.<sup>43</sup> These taxation systems provided Séléka leaders with enough funding to sustain their forces.<sup>44</sup> Local commanders were accountable to several hierarchies at the same time, namely their own, that of their group of origin and that of the Séléka command. They were generally left to their own devices<sup>45</sup> and have existed at all levels of command: regional, prefecture, sub-prefecture, town and even village.<sup>46</sup> Within these levels of command, some Séléka commanders were able to exert control with complete authority and lack of supervision.<sup>47</sup>

The Séléka coalition's vague lines of command made it difficult to establish responsibility for certain actions. Séléka (zone) commanders interviewed by Human Rights Watch (HRW) in 2013 said that any problems existing in their zones were the responsibility of the former commander, whose name they often did not remember. "The villagers had to run into the bush when Colonel Abdulim was here. I do not know his first name... but I have no problems here," said Colonel Saleh Zabadi, the highest-ranking Séléka member in Bossangoa.<sup>48</sup> Even Séléka's Minister of Public Security, Noureddine Adam, when confronted with human rights violations by his troops, said to HRW that "these events you are mentioning took place before our arrival."<sup>49</sup>

It was widely known that the Séléka coalition attacked and targeted humanitarian NGOs, civilians, and media organisations. The Séléka's human rights violations during its advance in 2012 and 2013 have been reasonably well documented. A Human Rights Watch report from 2013 details hundreds of attacks on villages and their citizens.<sup>50</sup> During its advance between December 2012 and March 2013, and its ensuing period in power, Séléka rebels killed and tortured scores of civilians, (gang)raped women and girls, recruited child soldiers, and its actions resulted in the displacement of tens of thousands of civilians.<sup>51-52</sup>

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40 France24 (6 April 2021). *Powerful armed group in Central African Republic vows to leave rebel coalition*. <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20210405-powerful-armed-group-in-central-african-republic-vows-to-leave-rebel-coalition>.

41 ACAPS (19 February 2021). *Central African Republic: Conflict-led displacement resulting from electoral violence*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/central-african-republic/acaps-briefing-note-central-african-republic-conflict-led>.

42 Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (31 May 2021). *Central African Republic*. <https://www.globalr2p.org/countries/central-african-republic/>.

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45 International Federation for Human Rights [FIDH] (June 2014). *Central African Republic: "They must all leave or die."* [https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/rapport\\_rca\\_2014-uk-04.pdf](https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/rapport_rca_2014-uk-04.pdf).

46 Idem.

47 Human Rights Watch (18 September 2013). *"I Can Still Smell the Dead" The Forgotten Human Rights Crisis in the Central African Republic*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/09/18/i-can-still-smell-dead/forgotten-human-rights-crisis-central-african-republic>.

48 Idem.

49 Idem.

50 Idem.

51 Amnesty International (14 May 2013). *Amnesty International's Brief on the Human Rights Situation in the Central African Republic*. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5196173c4.html>.

52 MINUSCA (May 2017). *Report of the Mapping Project documenting serious violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law committed within the territory of the Central African Republic between January 2013 and December 2015*. [https://minusca.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2017\\_car\\_mapping\\_report\\_-\\_eng.pdf](https://minusca.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2017_car_mapping_report_-_eng.pdf).

## MEDIA IN SITUATIONS OF CONFLICT

Access to objective information during conflicts is crucial if civilians are to survive and make informed decisions, and if an international audience is to grasp what is happening on the ground.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, over the last decade, journalists operating in conflict zones have had to deal with new and more complex challenges to their safety and security. Conflicts have become more splintered, with several combating parties on different fronts; the parties to these conflicts are often less organised and disciplined.<sup>54</sup> This resulted in increased attacks on journalists; CPJ reports that at least 133 journalists have been killed in the line of duty since the attack on Elisabeth Blanche Olofi in January 2013.<sup>55</sup> Speaking about journalists being killed in the line of duty, RSF Secretary General Christophe Deloire said: “The violence against journalists is more and more deliberate. They are clearly being targeted and murdered because they are journalists”.<sup>56</sup>

The importance of the work of local journalists operating in conflict zones on social media and through community radio stations should not be understated. They are often the only source of information for the local population<sup>57</sup> and for the international community, whose international journalists often rely on local fixers and journalists to gather information.<sup>58</sup>

According to CPJ, these local reporters run a significantly higher risk of falling victim to violence than international correspondents: 85% of journalists killed in the line of duty are local journalists.<sup>59</sup> More recent research shows that local journalists are even more vulnerable.<sup>60</sup> In 2018, 95 local journalists lost their lives, while in 2019 56 journalists were killed, representing 96 and 98 per cent respectively of total fatalities.<sup>61</sup> Typically, local journalists were murdered in their offices, during commutes or in their homes, and not while on actual assignment<sup>62</sup>, suggesting that local journalists have nowhere to hide or run once they are targeted.

Despite the importance of the work carried out by these local journalists in conflict zones and the increased risks they face as a result, they have far less pre-violence protection and post-violence assistance than their international colleagues. International journalists are often better equipped, receive hostile environment training, enjoy medical insurance or other benefits, and can leave the conflict zone when the situation becomes too tense.<sup>63-64</sup> Local journalists, despite doing important work, are thus targeted more and protected even less.

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64 UNESCO (2007). *Safety of Journalists*. <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/unesco/events/prizes-and-celebrations/celebrations/international-days/world-press-freedom-day/previous-celebrations/worldpressfreedomday2009000/themes/safety-of-journalists/#:~:text=Vulnerability%20of%20local%20journalists,local%20journalists%20doing%20their%20work>.

## Séléka's Relationship with the Media

In the Central African Republic, as in much of Sub-Saharan Africa, radio is the most important news medium by far.<sup>65</sup> According to Leon van den Boogerd, Programme Coordinator Sub-Saharan Africa for Free Press Unlimited, large parts of the population of rural CAR rely solely on community radio stations for their information.<sup>66</sup>

Although unevenly distributed across the country (most operate in Bangui), radio stations are one of the main sources of news because of the low level of literacy in CAR.<sup>67-68-69</sup> "Community radio stations in particular have a massive potential, especially in rural areas, but often lack the capacity to keep going," says Van den Boogerd. "The journalists often lack professional training or income, there is no power or fuel, and the journalists who excel often leave the countryside".<sup>70</sup> The capacity of these community radio stations to report the news objectively was diminished even further during the Séléka advance, causing an 'information crisis in large parts of CAR'.<sup>71</sup>

The Central African Republic currently ranks 126<sup>th</sup> out of 179 countries in the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) 2021 World Press Freedom Index.<sup>72</sup> At the time of the attack on Elisabeth Blanche Olofio, the Central African Republic ranked 65th in RSF's press freedom index.<sup>73</sup> Between December 2012 and December 2014, during CAR's latest security crisis, at least four journalists were murdered in the course of their work. Olofio was the first to be attacked in what became a disconcerting trend. It signalled a deterioration of media security that started with the advance of Séléka rebels in December 2012, during which they ransacked and destroyed dozens of community radio stations.<sup>74</sup> Those that resisted were often threatened, attacked, or worse.<sup>75</sup> Before the crisis, 29 radio stations operated in CAR.<sup>76</sup> In March 2014, only 15 of them remained operational. Others, among them Olofio's Radio Be Oko in Bambari, that had been looted or destroyed, had stopped broadcasting months earlier.<sup>77</sup> Pascal Chirha, in 2013 national coordinator at Institut Panos Europe in CAR, stated in February 2014 that due to Séléka's advance and its attacks on radio stations, "Central Africans are living in complete darkness as they have no access to information."<sup>78</sup> Interviewed again for this investigation, Chirha reiterated that the media was targeted specifically to silence them. "The Séléka attacked and killed journalists, and looted and vandalised radio stations because the media reported about the Séléka's violent acts. They wanted to keep their violence invisible to the public; they wanted to keep it hidden and erase all traces of what was really happening, so they silenced all the media," said Chirha.<sup>79</sup>

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65 International Media Support (February 2014). *The Central African Republic: Media in a complex emergency*. <https://www.mediasupport.org/publication/the-central-african-republic-media-in-a-complex-emergency/>.

66 Interview Leon van den Boogerd, 17 May 2021.

67 Time Williams (8 July 2013). *2013 World Radio Day Speech at SOAS*. <http://projects-direct.net/lessons-learned/2013/07/08/wrd-soas/>.

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75 Reporters Without Borders (23 December 2013). *Freedom of information buffeted from all sides*. <https://rsf.org/en/news/freedom-information-buffeted-all-sides>.

76 Jacobo Quintanilla & Jonathan Pedneault (September 2014). *Supporting local media in the Central African Republic*. <https://odihpn.org/magazine/supporting-local-media-in-the-central-african-republic/>.

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78 International Media Support (February 2014). *The Central African Republic: Media in a complex emergency*. <https://www.mediasupport.org/publication/the-central-african-republic-media-in-a-complex-emergency/>.

79 Interview Pascal Chirha, 31 May 2021.



## EXAMPLES OF SÉLÉKA TARGETING MEDIA

After Séléka took power and occupied the capital Bangui on 24 March 2013, the attacks against media and journalists did not stop but rather intensified. Elise Lugo, Secretary General of the Association of Women Journalists, had to hide on the premises of Radio Notre Dame for over a year.<sup>80</sup> Several newspapers were forced to shut down and radio stations, including Le Confident, Radio Nationale, Radio Ndéké Luka, Radio Néhémie, and Radio Notre Dame, were looted.<sup>81</sup> On 2 August 2013, managing editor of *Le Pays*, Davy Kpenouwen, was summoned and threatened with arrest.<sup>82-83</sup> One day later, Geoffroy Dotte, managing editor of *Dernières Minutes* was kidnapped by Séléka elements and interrogated for hours. In September and October 2013, editors of three Bangui-based daily newspapers<sup>84</sup> were interrogated and threatened after publishing stories of human rights violations by a special police organisation (CEDAD) led by Noureddine Adam, a general in the former Séléka coalition. At the same time, Christophe Gazam Betty, Communication Minister, appointed after Séléka took power, banned all media from talking about or publishing information on Séléka.<sup>85</sup>

In 2014, attacks on journalists continued unabated. On 29 April 2014, armed individuals tortured and shot journalist Désiré Sayenga.<sup>86-87</sup> On the same day, radio journalist René Padou was killed in a targeted grenade attack.<sup>88-89</sup> In response, over 100 journalists staged a protest march in Bangui to force the government and international forces to live up to their responsibility of protecting civilians.<sup>90</sup>

## The Situation in Bambari under the Séléka: 2012 – 2014

Séléka rebels in Bambari, under the leadership of zone commanders General Zoundeko, General Tom Adam, and Colonel Méa among others, wrecked the town of Bambari. Colonel Méa was the zone commander for the Kidjigra district on the eastern banks of Bambari.<sup>91-92</sup> General Tom Adam, also known as General Bin Laden due to the large beard he had until 2013, was the zone commander for the Séléka on the western banks.<sup>93</sup> Bin Laden

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80 Interview 6, 30 April 2021.

81 Reporters Without Borders (27 March 2013). *Call for compensation after rebels ransack and loot Bangui media*. <https://rsf.org/en/news/call-compensation-after-rebels-ransack-and-loot-bangui-media>.

82 MINUSCA (May 2017). *Report of the Mapping Project documenting serious violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law committed within the territory of the Central African Republic between January 2013 and December 2015*. [https://minusca.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2017\\_car\\_mapping\\_report\\_-\\_eng.pdf](https://minusca.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2017_car_mapping_report_-_eng.pdf).

83 Kpenouwen had reported that diamond trading house Badica had financed the Séléka's military advance on Bangui.

84 Julien Bella of *Centrafrique Matin*, Maka Gbossokotto of *Le Citoyen* and Ulrich Landry Ngopkele of *Quotidien de Bangui*

85 Reporters Without Borders (23 December 2013). *Freedom of information buffeted from all sides*. <https://rsf.org/en/news/freedom-information-buffeted-all-sides>.

86 MINUSCA (May 2017). *Report of the Mapping Project documenting serious violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law committed within the territory of the Central African Republic between January 2013 and December 2015*. [https://minusca.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2017\\_car\\_mapping\\_report\\_-\\_eng.pdf](https://minusca.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2017_car_mapping_report_-_eng.pdf).

87 Interview 3, 28 April 2021.

88 MINUSCA (May 2017). *Report of the Mapping Project documenting serious violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law committed within the territory of the Central African Republic between January 2013 and December 2015*. [https://minusca.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2017\\_car\\_mapping\\_report\\_-\\_eng.pdf](https://minusca.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2017_car_mapping_report_-_eng.pdf).

89 Interview 3, 28 April 2021.

90 MINUSCA (May 2017). *Report of the Mapping Project documenting serious violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law committed within the territory of the Central African Republic between January 2013 and December 2015*. [https://minusca.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2017\\_car\\_mapping\\_report\\_-\\_eng.pdf](https://minusca.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2017_car_mapping_report_-_eng.pdf).

91 Interview Habib Marwane, 6 July 2021.

92 Interview 9, 19 June 2021.

93 Idem.

is a notorious and feared commander<sup>94</sup> who has an abysmal record for violation of human rights. He is known to have committed numerous abuses against civilian populations in Bambari.<sup>95-96</sup> Habib Marwane, a former interpreter forced to work for rebel leader Ali Darassa at the time, told our investigators that Bin Laden was a violent general of the *Front Populaire pour la Renaissance de la Centrafricaine* (FPRC) and was loyal to Noureddine Adam. "He committed abuses against civilians, threatened journalists, and kidnapped children for ransom. He attacked two journalists of Radio Ndeke Luka in front of me," said Marwane.<sup>97</sup>



'General' Tom Adam in July 2014, still in Bambari, in the middle, talking with several UN Panel of Expert members. Source: UN Panel of Experts report S/2014/762.

94 Interview former UN Panel of Expert member, 23 December 2020.

95 International Crisis Group (12 December 2014). *La Face cachée du conflit centrafricain*. <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/b105-la-face-cachee-du-conflit-centrafricain.pdf>

96 Radio France International (7 November 2013). *Congo-Brazzaville: visite de Michel Djotodia à Oyo pour préparer la réunion de Bangui sur la RCA*. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20131107-congo-brazzaville-rca-visite-djotodia-oyo-preparer-reunion-bangui>.

97 Interview Habib Marwane, 6 July 2021.



The presence of commanders like Bin Laden resulted in Bambari being almost deserted. Citizens of Bambari stated that the population had fled because they feared reprisals of the rebels.<sup>98</sup> The rebels began what seemed to be a witch hunt on all officials and state agents, looting municipal, provincial and governmental buildings.<sup>99</sup> They were helped in their efforts by young people who had joined their ranks hoping to benefit from the looting taking place.<sup>100</sup> Citizens lived in a climate of fear. "The rebels punish for the slightest error, usually by summary executions," said a refugee who had fled to Bangui.<sup>101</sup> Examples of Séléka's violent acts include the December 2012 attacks on and pillaging of churches and other Christian religious institutions in Bambari, where Séléka rebels stole the priests' vehicles, a dozen computers, solar panels, and a dozen motorbikes.<sup>102</sup> Additionally, on 2 February 2013, Séléka fighters attacked civilians in Bambari and abducted and tortured a human rights defender for five days, after which the victim managed to escape. He had been targeted for having previously assisted the population attacked by the armed group.<sup>103</sup> A day later, on 3 February 2013, the Séléka attacked Bambari and surrounding villages, including Liwa, and killed 20 civilians, looted homes, and flogged the Liwa village chief until he revealed where villagers were hiding their possessions.<sup>104</sup>

Séléka's violence had a significant impact on the media community in Bambari, which was completely silenced. "All the journalists fled from Bambari. It was an extremely dangerous job and all of the journalists went into hiding out of fear," said Jean-Ignace Manengou, a Catholic priest and media professional.<sup>105</sup> All journalists fled from Bambari because Séléka rebels were specifically targeting journalists.<sup>106-107-108</sup> Commanders like General Bin Laden attacked local journalists and prevented international journalists from working in the area by threatening them and stealing their equipment.<sup>109</sup> Séléka targeted journalists because they had reported on the violence committed by the rebels since the start of their advance.<sup>110</sup> "They were attacked because they were giving information on what was going on," said Elise Lugo, Secretary General of the Women Journalists Association.<sup>111</sup> Throughout Séléka's time in charge, there was no freedom of expression in Bambari. A MINUSCA official noted that 'journalists were afraid to report and always had to keep their sources anonymous. Publicly known sources were beaten or threatened to be killed'.<sup>112</sup> It was only after the notorious zone commander General Bin Laden was replaced by the more respected General Ali Darassa, in the summer of 2013, that a handful of radio stations were able to resume some of their work.<sup>113</sup>

Finally, during the Séléka occupation, citizens of Bambari were prevented from seeking justice for the violence they had endured. A Human Rights Watch Report from 2013 shows that the local head of the Séléka in Bambari had declared himself the head of local courts, preventing Séléka victims from going to court.<sup>114</sup> Prior to Séléka's

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98 Réseau des Journalistes pour les Droits de l'Homme en République centrafricaine [RJDH-RCA] (19 March 2015). *Centrafrique: Plus de 1500 personnes interpellées, la MINUSCA dit veiller sur leurs condition de détention*. <https://reseaujournalistesrca.wordpress.com/>.

99 Interview 10, 18 June 2021; Interview 11, 19 June 2021.

100 Idem.

101 Idem.

102 MINUSCA (May 2017). *Report of the Mapping Project documenting serious violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law committed within the territory of the Central African Republic between January 2003 and December 2015*. [https://minusca.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2017\\_car\\_mapping\\_report\\_-\\_eng.pdf](https://minusca.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2017_car_mapping_report_-_eng.pdf).

103 Idem.

104 ACLED Data CAR Excel File.

105 Interview 3, 28 April 2021.

106 Interview 1, 28 April 2021.

107 Interview 3, 28 April 2021.

108 Interview 16, 19 June 2021.

109 Interview Habib Marwane, 6 July 2021.

110 Interview 1, 28 April 2021.

111 Interview 6, 29 April 2021.

112 Interview MINUSCA Official, 18 May 2021.

113 FRANCE24 (25 April 2014). *A radio station defends peace and tolerance in CAR*. <https://www.france24.com/en/20140425-radio-station-preaching-peace-love-car>.

114 Human Rights Watch (2013). *"I Can Still Smell the Dead": The Forgotten Human Rights Crisis in the Central African Republic*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/09/18/i-can-still-smell-dead/forgotten-human-rights-crisis-central-african-republic>.

arrival, Bambari was the regional judicial capital. A MINUSCA official interviewed for this investigation noted that all the judges, lawyers, officials, gendarmes, and police officers left immediately prior to the Séléka capturing Bambari: “There were no authorities left, so people could not initiate any cases. The journalists could therefore not rely on protection from the state.”<sup>115</sup> The Commander of the Research and Investigation Unit of the Gendarmerie in Bambari told our investigators that no official investigations have been initiated since 2013 because there was no Gendarmerie present at the time and because the Gendarme’s offices had often been looted. “There have been no investigations because our buildings were looted numerous times, most recently in December 2020,” said the Commander.<sup>116</sup>

Today, filing a criminal complaint against members of Séléka is still nearly impossible due to CAR’s broken justice system and the large number of uninvestigated crimes. National justice processes are only available to people in the capital, and CAR’s institutional capacity is severely limited.<sup>117</sup> The Special Criminal Court (SCC)<sup>118</sup>, a hybrid court created in 2015 to deal with the most serious human rights violations in CAR, is heavily underfunded and lacks capacity, with citizens deploring the SCC’s slow pace. Until early 2021, six years after its founding, the SCC had not initiated any criminal trial.<sup>119</sup> In a similar vein, the Truth, Justice, Reparations, and Reconciliation Commission (TJRRC) is not yet operational, despite its official founding in 2017.<sup>120</sup> Finally, CAR’s regular courts have only resumed criminal trials since 2015, and only 16 of the 24 tribunals were operational in 2020.<sup>121</sup> Amnesty International reported that in 2019, only 20 criminal cases were concluded in the whole country.<sup>122</sup> In short, although filing a criminal complaint is theoretically possible, achieving justice remains elusive for large parts of the population who suffered at the hands of the Séléka, especially those outside the capital.<sup>123</sup>

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115 Interview MINUSCA official, 18 May 2021.

116 Interview 11, 19 June 2021.

117 Cordaid (5 March 2021). *Surviving war and seeking justice in the Central African Republic*. <https://www.cordaid.org/en/news/surviving-war-and-seeking-justice-in-the-central-african-republic/>.

118 More information on the SCC can be found on their website: <https://cps-rca.cf/>.

119 Reem el Gantri (20 April 2021). *Why in the Central African Republic, Reparations Should Come First*. <https://www.ictj.org/news/why-central-african-republic-reparations-should-come-first>.

120 Idem.

121 Amnesty International (22 October 2020). Central African Republic: *While many ‘people are hungry for trials’ some warlords walk free*. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/10/central-african-republic-many-people-hungry-for-trials/>.

122 Idem.

123 Reem el Gantri (20 April 2021). *Why in the Central African Republic, Reparations Should Come First*. <https://www.ictj.org/news/why-central-african-republic-reparations-should-come-first>.

## 2. Elisabeth Blanche Olofio – Fearless and determined

Elisabeth Blanche Olofio was born on 8 September 1979 in Ippy, Central African Republic, one of a family of five.<sup>124-125</sup> Elisabeth's father died while her mother was pregnant with Elisabeth.<sup>126</sup> The family moved to Bria in the north of the country in the early 1980s. Unfortunately, the family lacked the funds to send Elisabeth to school when she was still young, so she remained illiterate until she was nine years old. She made a friend, and in 1988, Elisabeth and her friend attended a convent school in Bria. The two girls decided that they wanted to become nuns. "Our relationship was great, we felt like we were sisters. We both wanted to become nuns and started our training together," said her childhood friend.<sup>127</sup> Four years later, in October 1992, Elisabeth and her childhood friend entered the 'house of formation' of the Catholic Sisters in Bambari and began training to become nuns. "Elisabeth was always very willing to learn," says her childhood friend.<sup>128</sup>

In 2000, Elisabeth Blanche Olofio left the house of formation because those in charge decided that she was not destined to become a nun. However, they remained on good terms, and Elisabeth visited the community regularly.<sup>129</sup> After Elisabeth left the nuns, she met her husband and soon became pregnant with her first child. She worked multiple jobs while taking care of herself and her new family and also took care of her mother and two of her brothers at the same time.<sup>130</sup> Elisabeth earned enough to finance the building of a five-roomed house in Bambari. In 2004, Jean-Ignace Manengou, a catholic priest and Central African media professional, helped set up catholic Radio Be Oko ('One Heart' in Sango). The radio station was set up to broadcast a message of peace and hope in a tumultuous country.<sup>131</sup> The priest recruited Elisabeth as part of a team of five journalists, consisting of two women and three men. Her former colleagues at the radio station paint a picture of a brilliant, multi-functional and dynamic journalist, who was very courageous, daring and straightforward.<sup>132</sup> She rode her motorbike around Bambari to report on the news and hosted radio broadcasts.<sup>133</sup> "She did all the jobs around the radio station, even the technical jobs usually carried out by men," said Manengou.<sup>134</sup> In 2009, Pascal Chirha, who was working for Panos Institute at the time, trained Elisabeth in media development, and in 2011, on working for community radio stations. They kept in close touch after that, and even made a radio programme together. "She was curious, daring, strong-willed, and ambitious. She always wanted to learn more and was a very engaging and convincing person. She could make people give her information," said Chirha during an interview conducted for this investigation.<sup>135</sup>

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124 *Rapport de Suivi Medical – Elisabeth Blanche Olofio*. 11 June 2013.

125 Interview 12, 20 June 2021.

126 Interview 8, 1 May 2021.

127 Interview 8, 1 May 2021.

128 Interview 8, 1 May 2021.

129 Interview 8, 1 May 2021.

130 Interview 8, 1 May 2021; Interview 12, 20 June 2021.

131 France 24 (25 April 2014). *A radio station defends peace and tolerance in CAR*.  
<https://www.france24.com/en/20140425-radio-station-preaching-peace-love-car>.

132 Interview 3, 28 April 2021; Interview 1, 28 April 2021; Interview Pascal Chirha, 31 May 2021.

133 Interview 1, 28 April 2021.

134 Interview 3, 28 April 2021.

135 Interview Pascal Chirha, 31 May 2021.





Elisabeth, top row second from the left, at the 'maison de formation' in Bambari, 1992. Faces are blurred upon request of source. Source: childhood friend's personal archive.



Elisabeth Blanche Olofo sitting between two French nuns, bottom row with headscarf. Faces are blurred at the request of source. Source: childhood friend's personal archive.



Her job at Radio Be Oko was not without danger though. In 2012, Elisabeth Blanche Olofio was asked by international donors<sup>136</sup> to investigate why construction of the Michel Maitre school next to the St. Joseph Cathedral in Bambari had not been realised.<sup>137</sup> Elisabeth filmed the empty lot where the school was meant to have been built and informed the donors of the current situation. The bishop of the Diocese of Bambari, Edouard Mathos<sup>138</sup>, was furious when he got word of Elisabeth's investigation.<sup>139</sup> According to two sources interviewed for this investigation, Mathos threatened Elisabeth, saying: "A woman will never become a bishop in the Catholic Church. Why do you bring up these things and claim to take my place?"<sup>140</sup>

According to a family member, Elisabeth came home one day from a work meeting and said that she 'received very severe and personalised threats from Mathos during the meeting'.<sup>141</sup> Several people who knew Mathos told our investigators that he was a drunk,<sup>142</sup> and could be very aggressive towards his church workers.<sup>143</sup> Habib Hodi, an interpreter forced to work for Séléka commander Ali Darassa at the time, knew Mathos very well. He said that the reason Mathos was so rich was because he significantly looted his church of St. Joseph in Bambari. "He stole a lot and did not like people digging into his matters," said Hodi. Additionally, sources attested that Mathos was close to several Séléka commanders and relied on their protection during the Séléka's presence in Bambari.<sup>144</sup>

Besides the threats Elisabeth received from Bishop Mathos, she was also targeted by Séléka rebels when they came to Bambari in December 2012.<sup>145</sup> Elisabeth fled to a farm in the village of Oubadah, around 17 kilometres outside of Bambari.<sup>146</sup> Despite the dangers, Elisabeth did her best to continue working as a journalist.<sup>147</sup> She reported on rebel violence and rebel movements to her community via Radio be Oko.<sup>148</sup> Jean-Ignace Manengou noted that there was an incident in Liwa, a village just outside of Bambari. "The Fulani ethnic community there was attacked, and in retaliation, the Séléka burned down the whole village. Radio Be Oko reported on this case, and others, on air."<sup>149</sup> Elise Lugo told investigators that Elisabeth was deeply committed to her job. "She impressed me. Before the attack, she was a strong person," Lugo said.<sup>150</sup>

Despite the dangers associated with her work, family and colleagues remember how much Elisabeth loved her work as a journalist.<sup>151</sup> In 2016, Elisabeth's daughter Divine said that her mother used to wish her and her sister a happy birthday over the radio. "The whole village would then know it was our birthday!"<sup>152</sup> After the Séléka came to Bambari in December 2012, Elisabeth's life and work were subject to drastic upheaval.

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136 The investigative team was unable to confirm the identity of the international donors in question.

137 Interview 16, 19 June 2021; Interview 12, 20 June 2021; Conversation via chat application with Bernardin Sylvain Redjal, director of Radio Lego ti Ouaka, 5 August 2021.

138 Mgr. Mathos passed away in 2017.

139 Interview 12, 20 June 2021; Interview 16, 19 June 2021; Conversation via chat application with a humanitarian source and journalist who worked in CAR for the past decade, 9 August 2021.

140 Interview 16, 19 June 2021; Interview 12, 20 June 2021.

141 Interview 12, 20 June 2021.

142 Interview MINUSCA official, 18 May 2021; Interview Habib Hodi, 6 July 2021; Conversation via chat application with a humanitarian source and journalist who worked in CAR for the past decade, 6 August 2021.

143 Interview Habib Hodi, 6 July 2021.

144 Interview MINUSCA official, 18 May 2021; Interview Habib Hodi, 6 July 2021.

145 Interview Pascal Chirha, 31 May 2021; Interview 3, 28 April 2021; Interview 5, 29 April 2021.

146 Interview 12, 20 June 2021; Interview 13, 19 June 2021.

147 Interview 3, 28 April 2021.

148 Interview 6, 29 April 2021.

149 Interview 3, 28 April 2021.

150 Interview 6, 29 April 2021.

151 Interview 2, 28 April 2021; Interview Pascal Chirha, 31 May 2021.

152 Free Press Unlimited (1 November 2016). *Het verhaal van journaliste Elisabeth Blanche Olofio*.

<https://archive.freepressunlimited.org/nl/nieuws/het-verhaal-van-journaliste-elisabeth-blanche-olofio/index.html>.





Elisabeth Blanche Olofo, on the far right, working on covering the activities of a local NGO in Bambari. Source: internal archive.



# 3. The Attack on Elisabeth Blanche Olofio

This reconstruction is based on witness testimonies, photographic evidence, and official documents collected by investigators during a trip to Bangui in April and May 2021, and by a local investigator during a trip to Bambari in June 2021. It is supplemented with archived e-mail conversations, additional testimonies collected via video calls and chat apps and also in person, and news and official reports found online.

## Run-up to the Attack

When Séléka rebels, under the command of General Zoundeko, General Bin Laden and Colonel Méa, occupied Bambari at the end of December 2012, Elisabeth Blanche Olofio and her two daughters fled to a farm in the village of Oubadah, approximately 17 kilometres outside of Bambari.<sup>153</sup> “When the Séléka were in Bria in the north, they heard Elisabeth and other journalists giving information about them and their violent acts,” said Elisabeth’s husband Michel.<sup>154</sup> Additionally, according to one source living in the area, the Séléka had picked up on rumours that there was an investigative journalist in Bambari who had reported on the mismanagement of funds in the Catholic Church.<sup>155</sup> “They thought that if she can start an investigation on that, then she could also investigate them [the Séléka],” this villager who knew Elisabeth told our investigators.<sup>156</sup>



Map of Bambari and surrounding area. Elisabeth Blanche Olofio’s house is on the eastern bank while Radio Be Oko and the Michel Maitre School are on the western bank, near Cathedral St. Joseph. Séléka HQ, where Colonel Méa and General Bin Laden were likely stationed, was based in the centre of the town. Elisabeth’s farm (cut-in) is located approximately 17km to the west of Bambari. Source: Google Earth & various interviews.

153 Interview 2, 28 April 2021; Interview 1, 28 April 2021; Interview 12, 20 June 2021; Interview 13, 19 June 2021; Free Press Unlimited (1 November 2016). *Het verhaal van journaliste Elisabeth Blanche Olofio*. <https://archive.freepressunlimited.org/nl/nieuws/het-verhaal-van-journaliste-elisabeth-blanche-olofio/index.html>.

154 Interview 2, 28 April 2021.

155 Interview 16, 19 June 2021.

156 Interview 16, 19 June 2021.

Radio Be Oko was not spared. A colleague at Be Oko told *France24* in 2014 that the Séléka ransacked their radio station as soon as they arrived in Bambari: “Séléka members burned the radio station to the ground, taking everything of value with them.”<sup>157</sup> According to several interviewees, Elisabeth’s report on the Michel Maitre school in Bambari was also lost.<sup>158</sup>



The interior of Radio Be Oko after the Séléka looted the radio station. Source: FPU Archive.

Once the Séléka rebels took power in Bambari, they intensified their search for officials and journalists. In this process, they often relied on local youth for information leading to the whereabouts of their targets. In this case, a local Bambari youth named ‘Oyoh’<sup>159</sup> pointed out Elisabeth’s house to the Séléka rebels as the house of the journalist they were looking for.<sup>160</sup> Elements within the Séléka went to get her, but found her house abandoned. They looted the house, taking the motorbike that Elisabeth used for her reporting and other items.<sup>161</sup> Sources interviewed for this investigation suggest that Elisabeth returned to Bambari, either to receive treatment for Malaria<sup>162</sup> or to check the damage done to her house and her belongings.<sup>163</sup> Upon her arrival in Bambari on 5 January 2013, Elisabeth went straight to her godmother Augustine’s house in the Kidjigra neighbourhood, where she met her younger brother Madameye ‘Manda’ and six or seven other people.<sup>164</sup> Elisabeth’s family members and neighbours told our investigators that Oyoh, who allegedly still resides in Bambari, informed Séléka rebels, under the command of either Colonel Méa or General Bin Laden, of Elisabeth’s return.<sup>165</sup> “At around 13:00, they came for her in four Landcruiser vehicles,” said a close family member.<sup>166</sup>

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157 France 24 (25 April 2014). *A radio station defends peace and tolerance in CAR*. <https://www.france24.com/en/20140425-radio-station-preaching-peace-love-car>.

158 Conversation via chat application with Bernardin Sylvain Redjal, director of Radio Lego ti Ouaka, 5 August 2021; Conversation via chat application with a humanitarian source and journalist who worked in CAR for the past decade, 6 August 2021.

159 Interview 2, 28 April 2021; Interview 12, 20 June 2021; Interview 13, 19 June 2021; Interview 14, 21 June 2021.

160 Interview 3, 28 April 2021.

161 Interview 3, 28 April 2021; Interview 1, 28 April 2021.

162 Interview 12, 20 June 2021; Interview 13, 19 June 2021.

163 Interview 1, 28 April 2021; Interview 3, 28 April 2021; Interview 8, 1 May 2021.

164 Interview 12, 20 June 2021; Interview 13, 19 June 2021; Interview 9, 19 June 2021.

165 Interview 2, 28 April 2021; Interview 12, 20 June 2021; Interview 13, 19 June 2021; Interview 14, 21 June 2021.

166 Interview 12, 20 June 2021.





Destroyed Radio Be Oko. The transmitter was pulled down on top of the make-shift station. Source: FPU archive.

## Reconstruction of the attack

The collected testimonies for this investigation paint a violent picture of the events that unfolded next. As soon as the Séléka arrived, they ordered everyone to lie down.<sup>167</sup> A neighbour who was hiding from the rebels but could hear the situation unfold told our investigators that the elements that came to assault her made statements that made the neighbour believe the rebels targeted Elisabeth specifically. The neighbour recalls the rebels saying: “We are here to settle scores. We are on a special mission. We have been mandated.”<sup>168</sup> The rebels wanted to take Elisabeth with them, but she resisted, saying “if you need money I can give it to you”.<sup>169</sup> Elisabeth was the only woman of the group. “They started to abuse, torture and beat everyone. All of them were armed. They stayed for more than two hours,” said one family member.<sup>170</sup> “She was beaten on the neck and on her head with the butts of rifles,” recalls Elisabeth’s daughter Bertille, who did not witness the attack but spoke to her mother later.<sup>171</sup> Some sources, including Elisabeth’s daughter, noted that General Bin Laden was the commander of the rebels who beat her mother.<sup>172-173</sup> Others state that the rebels were loyal to Colonel Méa, the zone commander of Kidjigra district.<sup>174</sup> Either way, Elisabeth was beaten relentlessly for several hours over her entire body, sustaining a major injury to her forehead and losing the ability to move her legs.<sup>175</sup> In the Medical Report made upon her arrival in Bangui, and in other sources, our investigators found serious indications that Elisabeth was subjected to torture and was raped.<sup>176-177-178</sup> Her younger brother was also severely injured, sustaining multiple broken ribs.<sup>179</sup> At approximately 18:00, the rebels left, and those in hiding came out to help the victims. “Elisabeth was dying, bleeding from her nose and ears. She could not move her legs, she was not even conscious. She had abrasions all over her body and severe swelling on parts,” said a family member.<sup>180</sup> “She suffered too much after this rape,” said Elisabeth’s neighbour.

## Aftermath: January 2013 – June 2014

Elisabeth Blanche Olofio was left in such a bad state that her neighbours and relatives believed she was dead.<sup>181</sup> According to Elisabeth’s family, some young people from the community brought her back to the farm the same day.<sup>182</sup> One of Elisabeth’s sisters remembers: “She was badly injured and unconscious. We thought she was dead.” In the small community of Bambari, news of the attack travelled fast. Her former colleagues received the news about her death, but were unable to verify whether or not it was true since the phone lines had been cut and Séléka rebels were still looking for journalists.<sup>183</sup> Jean-Ignace Manengou, unable to get in touch with Elisabeth from Bangui and believing her to be dead, put out a communique reporting that Elisabeth had passed away.<sup>184</sup> In the weeks after the attack, several news agencies picked it up and reported that the journalist Elisabeth Blanche

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167 Interview 13, 19 June 2021.

168 Interview 16, 21 June 2021.

169 Idem.

170 Interview 13, 19 June 2021.

171 Interview 2, 28 April 2021.

172 Interview 2, 28 April 2021.

173 France 24 (25 April 2014). *A radio station defends peace and tolerance in CAR*. <https://www.france24.com/en/20140425-radio-station-preaching-peace-love-car>.

174 Interview 9, 19 June 2021; Interview 14, 21 June 2021; FPU Reporters Respond Application Form, January 2013.

175 Interview 8, 1 May 2021; Interview 2, 28 April 2021.

176 Interview 7, 30 April 2021; Interview 9, 19 June 2021; Interview 14, 21 June 2021.

177 *Rapport de Suivi Medical – Elisabeth Blanche Olofio*. 11 June 2013.

178 Email exchange between Panzi Hospital, Jean-Ignace Manengou and Pascal Chirha, September – October 2013.

179 Interview 1, 28 April 2021; Interview 12; 20 June 2021.

180 Interview 12, 19 June 2021.

181 Interview 2, 28 April 2021.

182 Interview 2, 28 April 2021.

183 Interview 1, 28 April 2021.

184 *Communique de Presse de Association des Radio Communutaires de Centreafrique*, 7 January 2013. N001/ARC/2013.

Olofio had been killed in Bambari.<sup>185-186</sup> Jean-Ignace tried to get to Bambari immediately, but he was not allowed to travel with a UN convoy heading there from Bangui.<sup>187</sup> One week after the attack, Elisabeth, by then conscious, heard about her own death on the radio.<sup>188</sup>

She was brought from the farm to the hospital in Bambari at the end of January 2013. The government, now aware that Elisabeth was still alive, summoned journalists in the capital to the presidential palace. They were told by President Bozize that Elisabeth was in fact still alive.<sup>189</sup> Elisabeth was brought to a hospital in Bambari by members of the Association of Women Journalists. The Séléka rebels, at that time still looking for journalists, got wind of her return to Bambari. Elisabeth's sister recounts: "The Séléka were still looking for journalists so the women's association told them: "If you want to kill her, you will have to kill all of us".<sup>190</sup>

On 25 February 2013, a voice recording surfaced in which Elisabeth recounted her ordeal: "You are listening to my voice, I am very much alive after what I have been able to endure at the hands of our brothers, the Séléka.... Like you, I followed the information of 11 January 2013 [on Radio France International about her death]. Like you, I cried."<sup>191</sup> At the end of February 2013, Elisabeth and her two daughters travelled from Bambari to Bangui with a United Nations convoy. In May 2013, while Elisabeth was doing her best to recover in Bangui, her younger brother Madameye 'Manda' Rodrique succumbed to the injuries he sustained during the attack.<sup>192</sup>



Elisabeth Blanche Olofio on 24 February 2013, a month and a half after the attack. Source: internal archive.

On her arrival in Bangui, Elisabeth Blanche Olofio took up residence at the *Centre Jean 23*, a catholic church in the northern part of town.<sup>193</sup> At that point, Elisabeth started to suffer increasingly from the long term effects of the attack. "She told me she has constant migraines. She only sleeps an hour and a half a day, she is really tired," said Jean-Ignace in an e-mail in February 2013.<sup>194</sup> Elisabeth was brought to the psychiatric ward of the *Hôpital Generale* in Bangui to begin treatment.<sup>195</sup> One of the doctors who treated her in Bangui told our investigators that she had suffered significant injuries, both physical and psychological and was severely traumatised.<sup>196-197</sup> "She had a severe case of PTSD and, in addition to the help for her physical problems, needed specialised aid. She was beaten and had bruises all over her body. She was suffering from shock," said one of the doctors.<sup>198</sup>

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185 Reporters Without Borders (10 January 2013). *Central African journalist killed amidst revolt*. <https://ifex.org/central-african-journalist-killed-amidst-revolt/>.

186 Radio France International had broadcast this message on the radio according to Jean-Ignace Manengou and Elisabeth Olofio herself.

187 Email exchange FPU – Jean-Ignace Manengou, 21 January 2013.

188 Voice recording Elisabeth Blanche Olofio, January 2013.

189 Email exchange FPU – Jean-Ignace Manengou, 21 January 2013.

190 Interview 2, 28 April 2021.

191 Voice recording Elisabeth Blanche Olofio, January 2013.

192 Interview 1, 28 April 2021; Interview 2, 28 April 2021.

193 Interview 6, 29 April 2021.

194 Email exchange FPU – Jean-Ignace Manengou, 25 February 2013.

195 Interview 7, 30 April 2021.

196 Interview 7, 30 April 2021.

197 *Rapport de Suivi Medical – Elisabeth Blanche Olofio*. 11 June 2013.

198 Interview 7, 30 April 2021.

While Elisabeth was attempting to recover, Séléka rebels had advanced southwards, taking Bangui in March 2013. She was stuck in the middle of a violent and turbulent city with militias roaming the streets, and became too afraid to go to the hospital regularly.<sup>199</sup> One of her doctors told our investigators that they wanted to keep her in the hospital, but she was too afraid of the Séléka to stay: “She was very stressed to be here. She was afraid that the Séléka rebels would find her again.”<sup>200</sup>

**CENTRE NATIONAL HOSPITALIER  
UNIVERSITAIRE DE BANGUI**  
 \*\*\*\*\*  
**SERVICE DE PSYCHIATRIE ET D'HYGIENE  
MENTALE**

**RAPPORT DE SUIVI MEDICAL**  
 DOSSIER N° 143/2013  
 B.P. 911 Tel: [REDACTED]  
 BANGUI (République Centrafricaine)

**Nom :** OLOFIO  
**Prénoms :** Blanche  
**Date et lieu de naissance :** 08 Septembre 1979 à Bangui  
**Nationalité :** Centrafricaine  
**Profession :** Journaliste  
**Situation Matrimoniale :** Célibataire, mère de 2 enfants

La patiente OLOFIO Blanche est suivie dans le service de Psychiatrie et d'Hygiène Mentale du C.N.H.U.B depuis le 25 Février 2013 jusqu'à ce jour pour des troubles psychiques et du comportement évoluant depuis environ 2 mois de manière insidieuse avant la première consultation.  
 Les symptômes de départ sont :

- 1- **Symptômes physiques**  
 Céphalées intenses à prédominance frontale  
 Notion d'épistaxis après un choc infligé par ses agresseurs
- 2- **Symptômes psychiatriques et psychosomatiques**  
 Troubles de sommeil avec des cauchemars  
 Peur incessante  
 Pleurs incessants  
 Délires  
 Hallucinations visuelles terrifiantes  
 Angoisse  
 Reviscense  
 Tentative de fuite en cas de détonation d'arme ou autre bruit semblable  
 Comportement d'alerte d'évitement  
 Anorexie  
 Tremblements  
 Palpitations sur notion d'hypotension artérielle (10/9 et 9/5)  
 Incontinence urinaire  
 Diarrhée  
 Asthénie physiques

Le tout évoluant depuis un mois, après avoir été victime d'agressions physiques, maltraitances et pillages par des hommes armés depuis Bambari, son lieu d'exercice professionnel.  
 L'Expertise psychiatrique a mis en évidence un Etat de Stress Post Traumatique dans sa phase pathologique.  
 Il a reçu le traitement suivant :  
 Lexomil comprimé 6 mg : ½ Comprimé  
 Dihydroergotamine gtt : 30 gouttes x 3/jour  
 Vitamine B complexe : 2comp x 2 / jour  
 Phénergan comp 25mg : 1 comp le soir  
 Elle a été hospitalisée du 08 au 15 Mars 2013  
 Un accompagnement psychologique a été associé à cet traitement et a débuté depuis le 26 Février 2013 et se poursuit jusqu'à ce jour.  
 Elle retrouvée à un moment donné une légère amélioration à la suite de cette prise en charge globale.  
 Cependant, depuis fin mars, après l'invasion des groupes armés dans la capitale, elle a repris les symptômes de départ. Elle se croit en insécurité, obstinée par l'idée qu'elle est tractée par ses agresseurs. Nous estimons que son environnement immédiat ne peut favoriser une prompte guérison.  
 Fort de ce constat, il est souhaitable qu'elle soit transférée dans un pays étranger où elle pourra bénéficier des conditions favorables pour une prise en charge adéquate.  
 Fait à Bangui, le 11 Juin 2013

[REDACTED]  
 [REDACTED]  
 [REDACTED]  
 [REDACTED]  
 Docteur [REDACTED]  
 [REDACTED]  
 [REDACTED]  
 [REDACTED]  
 [REDACTED]  
 [REDACTED]  
 [REDACTED]  
 [REDACTED]

Elisabeth Blanche Olofio's Medical Report, drawn up by a doctor at the psychiatric ward of the General Hospital in Bangui, 11 June 2013. Source: Internal archive.

Instead of getting better, Elisabeth gradually got worse. Her psychological and physical injuries could not be treated properly in Bangui, and the continued presence of the Séléka combined with the regular sound of gunfire, aggravated her trauma.<sup>201</sup> “Since the end of March [2013], after the invasion of armed groups of the capital, her symptoms have returned. She believes she is unsafe, and is obsessed by the idea that she is being tracked by her attackers. We believe this environment cannot promote a speedy recovery,” noted one of her doctors.<sup>202</sup> Her doctors also said that she needed to go abroad to receive the necessary treatment. In Bangui, they did not have the right equipment, experience or training to help her.<sup>203</sup> Free Press Unlimited tried to get her to Bukavu to the Panzi hospital of Nobel Peace Prize winner Dennis Mukwege MD., gynaecologist and expert on gender-based violence induced trauma. A first payment of €1,500 for the purpose of getting Elisabeth's children to school and of providing subsistence support was sent in April 2013.<sup>204</sup> In September and October 2013, Jean-Ignace Manengou and Pascal Chirha wrote to Panzi Hospital to arrange for Elisabeth to recover in a safe environment.<sup>205</sup> A Panzi Hospital representative informed them that the cost of the recommended 60 days

199 Interview 2, 28 April 2021.

200 Interview 7, 30 April 2021.

201 *Rapport de Suivi Medical – Elisabeth Blanche Olofio*. 11 June 2013.

202 *Rapport de Suivi Medical – Elisabeth Blanche Olofio*. 11 June 2013.

203 Interview 7, 30 April 2021.

204 Email exchange FPU – Jean-Ignace Manengou, 3 April 2013.

205 Email exchange Jean-Ignace Manengou, Pascal Chirha, and Panzi Hospital, 23 September 2013 – 22 October 2013.

Elisabeth was supposed to stay at Panzi, would amount to around €2,000.<sup>206</sup> On 22 October 2013, Jean-Ignace wrote: “I don’t know how to thank you! The smile on Elisabeth’s face when I told her was really broad!”<sup>207</sup> Despite this, increased violence in Bangui at that time prevented Elisabeth from getting out of the country.

In December 2013, Jean-Ignace wrote to Free Press Unlimited to request financial aid to make another attempt to get Elisabeth out of the country. He noted that Elisabeth was experiencing severe crises, tremors and headaches: “When she hears gunshots or sees someone in military clothes, blood seeps from her ears and nose. She called me yesterday to tell me that she had a bad headache and was hiding under the bed because she heard gunshots close by.”<sup>208</sup> Free Press Unlimited was asked for €2,000, to enable Elisabeth to travel to Panzi Hospital.<sup>209</sup> In early January 2014, FPU agreed to send the required sum to the bank account of the *Association de Radios Communautaires de Centrafrique* (ARC), of which Manengou was the director. The funds were wired on 19 February 2014.<sup>210</sup> Unfortunately, efforts to get her to Panzi Hospital failed once more. According to Jean-Ignace Manengou and FPU’s Leon van den Boogerd, this was due to issues with official documentation, such as her passport and her travel visa.<sup>211-212</sup>

According to those around her, Elisabeth Blanche Olofio was severely traumatised and emotionally affected for the rest of her life. “She was such a strong person before the attack, always joyful. But after the attack, she was very distant and weak, and most of the time, she did not even dare to speak,” said Elise Lugo.<sup>213</sup> Her doctors noted that Elisabeth was psychologically so weak that she hardly felt human anymore. “She often fainted or drifted off during conversations. She never wanted to talk with anyone about what happened to her. This type of psychological shock was very common while the Séléka were in power; I saw many patients with these symptoms,” said one of her doctors.<sup>214</sup> Over time, Elisabeth’s injuries worsened, and without the adequate medical and psychological help, her mind and body deteriorated. Towards the end, Elisabeth stopped eating and began to lose her ability to move.<sup>215</sup> “In the end, she was completely paralyzed,” her childhood friend recalls.<sup>216</sup> On the night of 22 June 2014 Elisabeth passed away, surrounded by the sisters from the church where she was staying at the time.<sup>217</sup> She was just 34 years old.

## Criminal investigation and legal proceedings

Since the attack on Elisabeth Blanche Olofio in January 2013, the Central African authorities have made no attempt to investigate the case. According to the Ministry of Justice’s *Charges de Mission*, interviewed for this investigation, in Elisabeth’s case there are three ways to initiate a criminal investigation and proceedings:

- colleagues at Radio Be Oko can file a complaint;
- Elisabeth’s family can file a complaint; or
- the Prosecutor General of Bambari can decide to start proceedings.<sup>218</sup>

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206 Idem.

207 Idem.

208 Email exchange FPU – Jean-Ignace Manengou, 22 December 2013.

209 Idem.

210 Email exchange FPU – Jean-Ignace Manengou, 25 April 2014.

211 Interview 3, 28 April 2021.

212 Interview Leon van den Boogerd, 17 May 2021.

213 Interview 6, 29 April 2021.

214 Interview 7, 30 April 2021.

215 Interview 7, 30 April 2021; Interview 8, 1 May 2021; Interview 2, 28 April 2021.

216 Interview 8, 1 May 2021.

217 Email exchange FPU – Jean-Ignace Manengou, 22 June 2014.

218 Interview 4, 29 April 2021.



From here, there are two main pathways to justice. The first is to go through the Special Criminal Court (SCC), which only deals with the most serious crimes.<sup>219</sup> If the SCC does not assume jurisdiction, the Prosecutor General of Bambari must start an investigation and initiate proceedings in a national court. In Elisabeth's case, both of these pathways to justice are complicated, due to CAR's severely weakened and understaffed justice system, the loss or destruction of evidence, and the death or disappearance of witnesses and suspects in particular.

The Commander of Research and Investigation of the Bambari Gendarme, assigned there on 5 October 2019, noted that an investigation into the attack on Elisabeth Blanche Olofio had not yet been instigated because of a gross lack of resources and because no Gendarme were in Bambari in January 2013. Furthermore, he noted that regional brigades like the one in Bambari were frequently attacked and looted. His own offices were looted as recently as December 2020.<sup>220</sup>

Even if an investigation is opened, it is highly unlikely that the case will go anywhere. For example, the high-profile case of French journalist Camille Lepage, who was killed in CAR in 2014, has been in Central African courts for years without result.<sup>221</sup> Furthermore, Elise Lugo said that numerous local cases have been filed over the years but that the Central African Government has been unable to close any of them and bring the perpetrators to justice.<sup>222</sup> Impunity for crimes in general and against journalists in particular, has become 'entrenched' in the Central African Republic.<sup>223</sup>

In Elisabeth's case, no attempt was even made to initiate an investigation. No witnesses were interviewed, and no effort was made to secure evidence. In the meantime, key (eye)witnesses died, evidence was destroyed or got lost<sup>224</sup>, and suspects went missing. Elisabeth herself, who would have been able to give a detailed account of what happened to her for a year and a half, was never interviewed. During our investigation, we spoke to several individuals who at one time had photos and videos of the incident and its aftermath on their laptops and phones. Much of this material was lost over time. "I had a lot of photos from that time, but I stored them on my computer, which I lost when I tried to flee to Bangui," said one of Elisabeth's close colleagues.<sup>225</sup> The reports that Elisabeth worked on were lost in multiple lootings of her house and the radio station.<sup>226-227</sup> Furthermore, several identified (eye)witnesses and suspects died over the years without ever recording their testimonies. Elisabeth's younger brother Manda, present during the attack, died as a result of his injuries in May 2013. Elisabeth's godmother Augustine, who witnessed the attack, died of natural causes in 2016.<sup>228</sup>

Bishop Edouard Mathos, who featured in one of Elisabeth Blanche Olofio's investigative reports, died of natural causes in April 2017.<sup>229</sup> At least two of the Séléka zone commanders responsible at the time, have since died, and one has been off the radar since 2017. General Zoundeko was killed in 2017 in a battle 150 km east of Bambari.<sup>230</sup> Colonel Méa, one of the two commanders suspected of being involved in the attack on Elisabeth, died at an

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219 Interview 4, 29 April 2021.

220 Interview 11, 18 June 2021.

221 Lewis Mudge (11 May 2019). *Photographer's Death in Central African Republic Still Unsolved*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/05/11/photographers-death-central-african-republic-still-unsolved>.

222 Interview 6, 30 April 2021.

223 Human Rights Committee (5 March 2020). *Rights Committee: Entrenched impunity and "infernal cycle of violence" at the heart of the dialogue with the Central African Republic*. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25665&LangID=E>.

224 Interview 1, 28 April 2021; Interview 8, 1 May 2021; Interview 3, 28 April 2021; Interview 5, 2021.

225 Interview 1, 28 April 2021.

226 Conversation via chat application with Bernardin Sylvain Redjal, director of Radio Lego ti Ouaka, 5 August 2021.

227 Interview 3, 28 April 2021.

228 Interview 1, 28 April 2021; Interview 2, 28 April 2021. Interview 3, 28 April 2021; Interview 8, 1 May 2021.

229 Catholic Hierarchy. <https://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/bishop/bmathos.html>.

230 Interview MINUSCA Official, 18 May 2021.

unspecified time.<sup>231</sup> Lastly, General Bin Laden was expelled from Bambari in the summer of 2014, after which he went to Bria in the north of the country, where he settled in December 2014.<sup>232</sup> In 2015, the UN Panel of Experts reported that Tom Adam, or Bin Laden, was in a leadership fight in Sam-Ouandja, which he appeared to have won by the end of October 2015.<sup>233</sup> He was supposedly last heard from in January 2017 in a Human Rights Watch report, where local officials in Ouaka province recognized those who attacked their villages as belonging to Tom Adam, who was then allegedly based in Alindao.<sup>234</sup>

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231 Interview 3, 28 April 2021.

232 Cyril Bensimon. 15 December 2014. *Lu pour vous: en RCA, les factions se disputent Bri et se diamants*. *Le Monde*. <http://centrafrique-presse.over-blog.com/2014/12/lu-pour-vous-en-rca-les-factions-se-disputent-bria-et-ses-diamants.html>.

233 UN Panel of Experts S\_2015\_936.

234 Human Rights Watch. 2 May 2017. *Central African Republic: Armed Groups Target Civilians*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/05/02/central-african-republic-armed-groups-target-civilians>.

# 4. Conclusion

During the Séléka rebel advance in the Central African Republic, Elisabeth Blanche Olofio was a courageous journalist working to provide her community with crucial information about rebel movements and their human rights violations. Elisabeth was attacked because of her work. In a country where large parts of the population depend solely on local journalists like Elisabeth to provide them with information, the targeting of these journalists by the Séléka rebels caused a total information blackout.

This investigation found that journalists in the Central African Republic were deliberately targeted by the Séléka rebel coalition to silence them. Elisabeth was attacked for reporting the truth by Séléka General Tom Adam or Colonel Méa and some of their men in January 2013. She was beaten, tortured, raped, and left for dead. Yet, she survived, and later heard about her own presumed death on the radio. Fearing the rebels in Bambari might find and kill her, she fled to the capital Bangui.

In the first few weeks after Elisabeth arrived in Bangui, her doctors noted a marked improvement. However, when the Séléka captured Bangui in March 2013, Elisabeth lived in constant fear and remained in hiding; she suffered constant mental and physical agony due to a severe lack of healthcare and the proximity of her aggressors. Already severely traumatised and afraid, her symptoms were exacerbated by the presence of the Séléka and worsened beyond the point of recovery. She stopped eating and gradually became paralyzed, eventually succumbing to her injuries in June 2014. Elisabeth left behind two young daughters.

Local journalists like Elisabeth Blanche Olofio play a significant role in reporting on conflicts to both their communities and to international audiences, but are often targeted by warring parties wishing to silence them. Elisabeth suffered for a year and a half after being attacked. If certain instruments had been in place to treat her, her suffering might have been alleviated; she might even have been saved. It was because of administrative and financial difficulties that efforts to bring her to safety at Panzi Hospital in Bukavu, DRC, failed. These issues must be addressed by the international community, specifically by those countries who have the financial and institutional capacity, and the political will, to do so.

More than nine years after the attack on Elisabeth Blanche Olofio, not a single suspect has been identified or brought to justice, nor has there been any attempt to investigate her case. This is partly due to the serious lack of capacity of the judicial system, and partly due to systemic impunity in the Central African Republic – a persistent problem that successive governments have failed to address. In the meantime, the victim and several key eyewitnesses have died, the main suspects have gone missing or died, and crucial evidence has been lost or destroyed. As a result, the chance of achieving justice for Elisabeth Blanche Olofio has diminished drastically.

Based on our investigation, we find that justice for crimes against local journalists in conflict zones in general, and for Elisabeth in particular, remains elusive. There is a real risk that many of these cases will be forgotten altogether. In order to achieve justice for Elisabeth and improve the safety of local journalists working in conflict zones, we make the following recommendations:

*To the competent judicial authorities:*

1. **The Prosecutor of the Special Criminal Court should immediately open an investigation into crimes against journalists committed by all warring parties in the Central African Republic since 2012.** The impact of a journalist killed goes beyond the killing itself, since it has a far-reaching effect on people's access to information, which is especially crucial during times of conflict. The Prosecutor's overarching investigation should include an investigation into the attack, torture and rape of Elisabeth Blanche Olofio, which took place in January 2013. Specifically, this investigation should be directed at the roles played by (Ex) Séléka General Tom Adam, also known as 'General Bin Laden', Séléka Colonel Méa, Bishop Edouard Mathos and 'Oyoh'. All investigations should pay specific attention to the chain of command.

To the Government of the Central African Republic:

2. **Commit to and strictly abide by UNSC Resolution 1738 (2006) and 2222 (2015), and implement the UN Plan of Action on the safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity (2012).** Article 7 of UNSC Resolution 1738 and Article 5 of UNSC Resolution 2222, emphasise CAR's obligations under international law, to end impunity and to prosecute those responsible for serious violations of international humanitarian law.

To the International Community:

3. **States are urged to introduce a new emergency visa for journalists at risk, including granting a visa to immediate family members of the journalists at risk.** This is in line with the 'Report on Providing Safe Refuge for Journalists at Risk' by the Independent High-Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom. This report argues that an emergency visa, paired with stronger care after (temporary) relocation, can prevent the murders of journalists or the severe physical and psychological effects of attacks and threats, as occurred in the case of Elisabeth, against them. When attempting to acquire visas, journalists in distress, especially local journalists, often experience obstacles, resulting in serious risks to their safety. Most notably, they experience delays in their visa procedure, the criminalization of journalistic activities preventing them from acquiring a visa, post-relocation threats and issues, and are unable to resume their work. Such visas should be available to the relatively small group of journalists from across the world who are in mortal danger and apply for this support.

As aptly put in the report of the High-Level Panel: "*Leaving their home countries, at least while a threat to their safety exists, is all too often the only way for these journalists to avoid politically motivated harassment, kidnapping, incarceration, violence or even assassination. It is not a decision taken lightly, nor is it one motivated by a desire to relocate permanently: the wish to move is driven by necessity.*" This emergency visa would fill a significant gap in the current regime for safe relocation. In particular, journalists under imminent threat should be able to move to safety quickly and securely, yet the current pathways do not provide this recourse.

4. **Support the call for an independent International Investigative Task Force.**  
An independent International Investigative Task Force can provide a key entry point for justice in contexts where corruption, weak institutions, or a lack of resources impede investigations by national authorities. The Task Force should consist of investigative, forensic and legal experts who will be deployed to crime scenes or provide other forms of support to national investigators. Ideally this instrument should be established by the United Nations, as originally proposed by former UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Killings, Agnès Callamard. States should support this initiative and contribute to the Task Force with funding, a roster of experts that can be called upon, diplomatic support, and advocacy. Especially those member States of the Media Freedom Coalition and signatories of the Global Pledge on Media Freedom.
5. **Support the call for the establishment of a new Special Representative of the UN Secretary General for the Safety of Journalists** so that the Secretary General, UN General Assembly and Security Council can more effectively engage in advancing accountability for crimes against journalists. Appointed by the Secretary-General, the Special Representative's mandate should include following up on the progress of investigations into attacks on journalists and fostering cooperation with the competent national authorities. In the case of Elisabeth Blanche Olofio, the UN Special Representative could have pushed Central African authorities to assist with Elisabeth's evacuation, and urged the Democratic Republic of Congo to issue a visa to facilitate Elisabeth's trip to Panzi Hospital in Bukavu.
6. **In close collaboration with International NGOs, start exploring the creation and implementation of an 'Alert Database' where journalists and their relatives and colleagues, and members of civil society can collect and store evidence (photos, video, text messages, documents, etc.) concerning threats against and attacks on journalists.** Too often, crucial evidence and testimonies are lost over time, especially where it takes years to investigate crimes against journalists. Providing relatives and colleagues with a system to collect and upload evidence and testimonies of attacks on journalists can help NGOs and the international community to better monitor those attacks and provide adequate emergency, legal, and security assistance.

# Appendix: timeline with key events

Unspecified date in 2012	▶ Elisabeth is asked by unidentified international donors to investigate the non-realization of the construction of a school on the Catholic Diocese's premises in Bambari, severely angering Bishop Edouard Mathos
December 2012:	▶ Séléka rebel coalition start military advance from the north of the Central African Republic, slowly moving south towards the capital Bangui.
23 December 2012	▶ Séléka coalition captures Bambari, Elisabeth's hometown. The Séléka immediately starts targeting journalists and Elisabeth flees to a farm in Oubadah, 17km outside of Bambari.
5 January 2013	▶ Between 13:00 and 18:00 local time, Elisabeth is attacked, beaten, tortured and raped in the Kidjigra district of Bambari by Séléka rebels. Severely injured, she is brought back to her farm to recover.
11 January 2013	▶ Radio France International reports on the airwaves that Elisabeth has died. Elisabeth, by then back to consciousness, hears about her own presumed death.
End of January 2013	▶ Elisabeth is brought back to Bambari to go to the hospital, the Government of the Central African Republic becomes aware that Elisabeth is still alive.
25 February 2013	▶ Elisabeth makes a voice recording recounting her ordeal, which is shared with FPU and various radio channels.
End of February 2013	▶ Elisabeth and her two daughters travel on a UN convoy to Bangui to get medical assistance. She finds residence at the catholic church Centre Jean 23 in the northern part of Bangui. Jean-Ignace reports to FPU on Elisabeth's medical situation.
24 March 2013	▶ The Séléka coalition captures the Central African Republic's capital Bangui. Elisabeth's doctors noted that her condition worsens severely after this event.
April 2013	▶ Jean-Ignace writes to FPU to request financial aid for Elisabeth and her children. A sum of €1500 meant for subsistence support is paid out by FPU to Jean-Ignace in April 2013.
May 2013	▶ Elisabeth's younger brother and eyewitness Madamaye 'Manda' Rodrigue succumbs to his injuries in Bambari.
September – October 2013	▶ Jean-Ignace and Pascal Chirha write to Dennis Mukwege's Panzi Hospital in Bukavu, DRC, to arrange for Elisabeth to recover in a safe environment. A Panzi Hospital representative tells them it will cost €2000 for the recommended 60 days Elisabeth is supposed to stay in Bukavu.
December 2013	▶ Jean-Ignace again writes to FPU to request financial aid to pay for Elisabeth's travel to and stay in Panzi Hospital.
Early January 2014	▶ FPU agrees to pay €2000 for Elisabeth's transfer to Bukavu.
19 February 2014	▶ FPU wires the funds to the bank account of Association de Radios Communautaires de Centrefrique (ARC). Unfortunately, efforts to get Elisabeth to safety fail due to issues with her official documentation.
12 May 2014	▶ French journalist Camille Lepage is killed while traveling on a motorbike with Anti-Balaka militia, about 120km outside of Berberati, CAR. She was reportedly murdered by Séléka fighters.
22 June 2014	▶ Elisabeth succumbs to her injuries.
Unspecified date in 2016	▶ Elisabeth's godmother and eyewitness Augustine dies of natural causes.
Unspecified date in 2017	▶ Séléka General Zoundeko, zone commander of Bambari, is killed in a battle 150km East of Bambari.
January 2017	▶ Last known whereabouts of General Tom Adam, also known as 'Bin Laden', are reported to be Alindao, CAR. Adam was a zone commander in Bambari and was pointed out by family, relatives and colleagues of Elisabeth as one of her attackers.
April 2017	▶ Bishop Edouard Mathos, who severely threatened Elisabeth in 2012, dies of natural causes.

# A Safer World For The Truth