

# Local dynamics of security in Africa: The Central African Republic and private security

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## Introduction

Unprecedented challenges are faced by the Central African Republic (CAR), a country with a considerable potential for resource conflicts which in turn provides local leaders with opportunities for privatising security in exchange for natural resource concessions (Reno 1999). The CAR's recent history contains a number of cases of kidnappings and killings; roads have become impassable because of attacks by bandits, the so-called *zaraguinas*; and arms bazaars, like the one in the capital at *Kilomètre 5*, provide the necessary tools for any kind of organised violence. It could be said that that is where the sovereignty of the state ends, as it is argued in *The state stops at PK 12*, by Bierschenk and De Sardan (1997).

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A land-locked former French colony, the CAR was terra incognita until a century and a half ago. In 1889, with a ceremony consisting of the exchange of blood and burial of a rifle cartridge, a French administrator and a village chief inaugurated the colonial outpost of Bangui (Kalck 1993:78). The French colony became known as Oubangui-Chari until its decolonisation process, which started in 1958 and was completed in 1960. The founding father of the country, Barthélémy Boganda, died in a suspicious plane accident and after a few years of struggle between his former aides, Jean-Bédél Bokassa took power and declared himself first president, and later emperor. In recent years, elections resulted in various governments headed first by Horace Kolimba and later Ange-Félix Patassé until the latter was toppled by Francois Bozizé in 2003. In May 2005 a rebellion occurred in the north-western parts of the country and a few months later a second rebellion occurred in the north-eastern part.

The first rebellion was headed by the *Armée populaire pour la restauration de la république et de la démocratie* (APRD). Some of its members had served in Patassé's *Garde présidentielle* and some were young recruits in their teens who wore football T-shirts and sunglasses and were armed with archaic hunting rifles and knives. The APRD claims to be about 1 000 men strong (Africa Confidential 2007:48). In 2005, as Chadian forces were evacuated from the north-west of the CAR, the area was taken by APRD insurgents. They then moved towards the Kabo-Kaga Bandoro corridor, which was only 350 km from Bangui.

The second rebellion was led by the *Union des forces démocratiques pour le rassemblement* (UFDR), a coalition of three groups that united under this banner in September 2006 in Rwanda.<sup>1</sup> It comprises 500 to 1 000 fighters, located in the north-eastern part of the country. The town of Birao, capital of the region, is at the heart of the battle between this group of rebels and loyalists. Government troops succeeded in their counteroffensive only with French logistics support, which was augmented by a French air force attack followed by a paratrooper operation (ICG 2007:30).

The rebellions lead to a crisis of government. The Central African Armed Forces and presidential elite guards were the only forces that remained loyal to the government, but they were guilty of ruthless repression of the population, particularly in the north-west. Government forces, and especially the *Garde présidentielle*, perpetrated much of the violence and Amnesty International (2006) reported that soldiers targeted human rights workers and journalists because they denounced the violence against civilians. Scorched earth tactics caused hundreds of civilian casualties and more than two million persons were displaced. Paramilitary police units were set up to deal with 'banditry' in the capital and carried out summary killings of suspected 'rebels' and 'bandits' (Human Rights Watch 2007). With rising lawlessness and what observers described as a ghost government, the question is what was the response of the security providers, the traditional policing institutions? A second question that arises from this, concerns the state of the local private security sector and where it operated. These questions are explored in the next sections.

## Ascending private security

There has been a tremendous increase in private security firms in Africa (Mills & Stremlau 1999, Howe 2004; Musah & Fayemi 2000). Private contractors form a large component of the American forces in both Iraq and Afghanistan, but in Africa private security has undergone a less visible but most remarkable expansion. Following a widely held dichotomy, one can distinguish between private military companies (PMCs) and private security companies (PSCs) (Singer 2003), although Avant (2004) prefers the term PSC as being the one that will eventually encapsulate both categories. In this paper the focus is on PSCs. In general, PSCs are the companies that provide services ranging from close protection (or bodyguard duties) to training, management and administration of corporate security programmes and embassies and protection of aid or humanitarian organisations. Unlike the specifically military companies, which specialise in selling military expertise and training, the chief focus of security companies is more benign and is oriented towards commercial clients. According to my research four main PSCs and one PMC are operating in the CAR. By comparison, there used to be as many as 90 registered PSCs in Angola with two of them controlling most of the market (Vines 1999:73). In fact, with the exception of South Africa, Angola had the highest number of firms in Africa (Vines 1999:73).

The following is based on actual interviews with PSCs: I was eventually able to meet with the representatives of three of the companies present in Bangui. One of the companies, in charge of the premises of the American embassy and of other private companies such as telecommunications operator Nationlink, could not be contacted in spite of repeated attempts. Another company, called King's Service, was more helpful. Their list of clients ranges from private medical facilities to telecom or extractive industry companies and to embassies. Mining companies, too, rely on the services of King's Service, both in the city of Bangui and in the field.<sup>2</sup> It is claimed that the local beer brewery, Mocaf, is also one of its clients. During the pillaging of 2003, their buildings were looted as were many other private stores, houses and public buildings. In the interviews the representatives were at times ambiguous about their operations and management of business relations, which is understandable if one accepts that a degree of discretion is necessary regarding the activities of the security sector.

Different commercial policies are applied, depending on the type and mission of the organisation. Contracts with embassies are the most lucrative, prestigious and sought after, with the monthly rate per embassy guard being FCFA150 000 (US\$314).<sup>3</sup> The rate paid by other clients can be much lower, bottoming out at FCFA90 000 (US\$188) for humanitarian or development organisations.

King's Service, which was created in 1988, is one of the oldest companies. Amongst its many prestigious clients it numbers the Japanese Embassy (which it has served for 15 years) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (served for the last decade).

Its commercial spot, related by one of his representatives, features a raid on a house in the outskirts of Bangui. It has a staff of about 300 (it used to be as high as 480), with a central station and a task force of ten guards who are always on standby.

A former *sous-officier* of the French Army founded another company, called Powers, in 2003. After a career in the army and some years of active duty in Chad and other African locations, he created what turned out to be a profitable business venture. His clients are mostly French companies and include some well-known local enterprises. The company claims to have 650 trained guards, 250 of which are currently employed and under contract, while the rest are on standby and readily available. The personnel are all healthy young men who have at least a high school education. All of them undergo military and first aid training when they are hired. Powers provides the training, selection and deployment of local guards for key installations, as well as services such as threat assessment, consultancy (which includes an analysis of risk), crisis management (which entails working with clients on possible risk scenarios), and elaborate contingency planning, particularly for emergency evacuations.

The third company, Fox Sécurité, diversified its activities and has a presence in many parts of the country, apart from the capital city itself. For example, it provides guards in the north-eastern region near Darfur, in Birao and also has clients and guards in Bakouma, where uranium was found in a series of phosphate deposits where exploitation will start by the end of 2009. The presence of Fox Sécurité agents and cars, as well as the general presence of PSCs in the streets of the capital, Bangui, are very noticeable and exceed that of the police or gendarmerie.

An interesting feature of the local PSCs is that their employees are generally local men. Whereas international PSCs are able to 'handpick employees in a large pool of qualified applicants' (Vines 1999:47), local PSCs seem to hire locals, usually men in their early twenties. These men are not necessarily former soldiers or veterans, nor are they former employees of the traditional police corps, even though such persons would be state trained and possibly more experienced.

It is also notable that the private security sector is increasing in the CAR. The use of private security started in the 1990s and in fact, two PSCs were founded in the nineties. This increase in demand for private security may be ascribed to structural short-term reasons. However, during the last four years demand has been fuelled by the return of expatriates involved in externally financed development projects or humanitarian aid. (After the steep decline in funding in 2003, international funding it is now on the increase again. Foreign companies have been attracted by the exploitation of natural resources such as uranium and diamonds, the rapidly developing telecom industry and a revival of environmental schemes – EIU 2004.) In fact, one PSC was only founded in 2003 and a new PMC has appeared to insulate the president from the country's restlessness. Heavily armed South African mercenaries at present maintain security around President Bozizé,

reportedly as part of a three-year deal between South Africa and the CAR worth US\$50 million (Africa Confidential 2007:25).<sup>4</sup> In the short term 'the growth of the sector has been counter-cyclic, and economic and political crises fuel the demand' (Lock 1999). The conclusion is that the growth of private security in the CAR follows the continental dynamic. The growth conforms to the pattern in the developing world and in this sense, fits a global process of commodification of security.<sup>5</sup> As Peter Lock (1999:25) noted, 'growth rates of the sector are well above the average in industrial countries – 8 per cent annual growth – and virtually exploding in transition countries – 20 per cent annual growth, and in most parts of the Third World, 10–30 per cent annual growth'.

The growth of the industry occurs, at least in part, through the non-state actors that fund the security sector, which conforms to the statement by Avant (2004:154) that 'states are not the only organizations that finance security. Increasingly, non-state actors (NGOs, multinational corporations, and others) pay for security services-funding PSCs'. In the CAR, the International Rescue Committee, which is a non-government organisation (NGO), hired private security for their Bangui office as well as for a health project called Kaga Bandoro in the north-west of the country. The fact that many NGOs turn to private security in many contexts is well established. According to Deborah Avant (2004:153), for example, when the World Wildlife Fund was faced with the possible extinction of the northern white rhino in a park in the DRC, it solicited a bid from Saracen, a South African and Angolan security firm, to train and protect the guards.

If non-state actors fund the security sector the question is whether such non-state funding of security enhances or erodes public security? Because weak states frequently purchase services from the same PSCs, these firms should bring with them the potential for greater integration with international values. However, what Avant describes as improved social control in weak states, does not yet apply to the CAR. With a few exceptions, notably the South-African PMC that protects the president, the private security sector is still mostly local at this stage, which means that the assimilation of international norms and skills through PSCs is limited. Second, weak states could have short-term functional gains from contracting PSCs (Avant 2005:81). If state institutions are debilitated, a rising private sector may offer capabilities simply not available via the state. This leads to the next question, namely whether the presence of non-state actors provides further tools or does it, conversely, through a decreased monopoly on violence, perversely reinforce the use of violence? This is a question that is difficult to answer without an in-depth look at the dynamics of public security.

## **Dwindling public security**

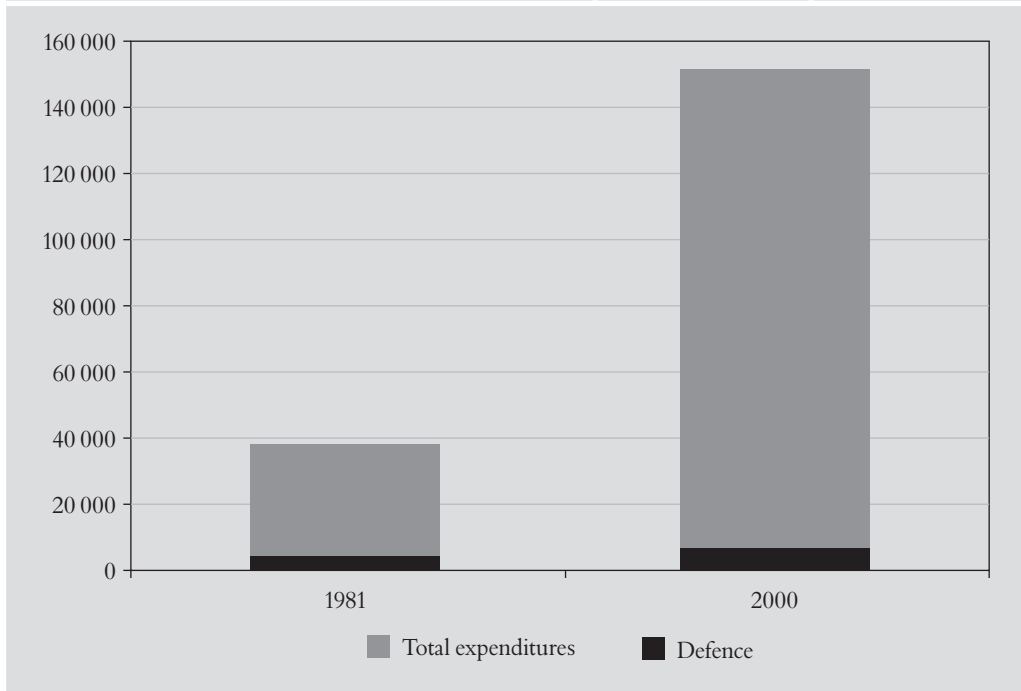
Three features emerge from my analysis of public security: a steep decline in government spending, poor coordination between traditional policing corps, and finally, a deep-seated corruption.

A study of the national budget shows that the proportion of the national budget allocated to security has decreased in the last two decades. The result is that the size of the military has decreased, too. For example, the portion allocated to the gendarmerie, a military corps that has some public security functions, dropped from 12,5 per cent of the national budget in 1981, to 4,6 per cent in 2000 (see table 1).

However, the definition of what should count as security forces is ambiguous in the CAR. There are at least three reasons for this: modifications in budget allocation, off-budget expenditures, and extra-national expenditure on security. First of all, changes in the budget allocation complicated my ability to compare data over a number of years. In 1980 the police force formed part of the *Département de la sécurité*, which no longer exists, and police expenditure now falls under the Ministry of the Interior. The second problem is that some military items may be financed entirely outside the government budget, so-called off-budget expenditures. The previous president, for example, had a personal militia, the *Karako*, with some 30 private security agents who had been hired by

**Table 1 Relative expenditure on defence**

Year	1981	2000
Defence	4 263	6 657
Total expenditure	34 085	144 527
Relative spending	12,5	4,6



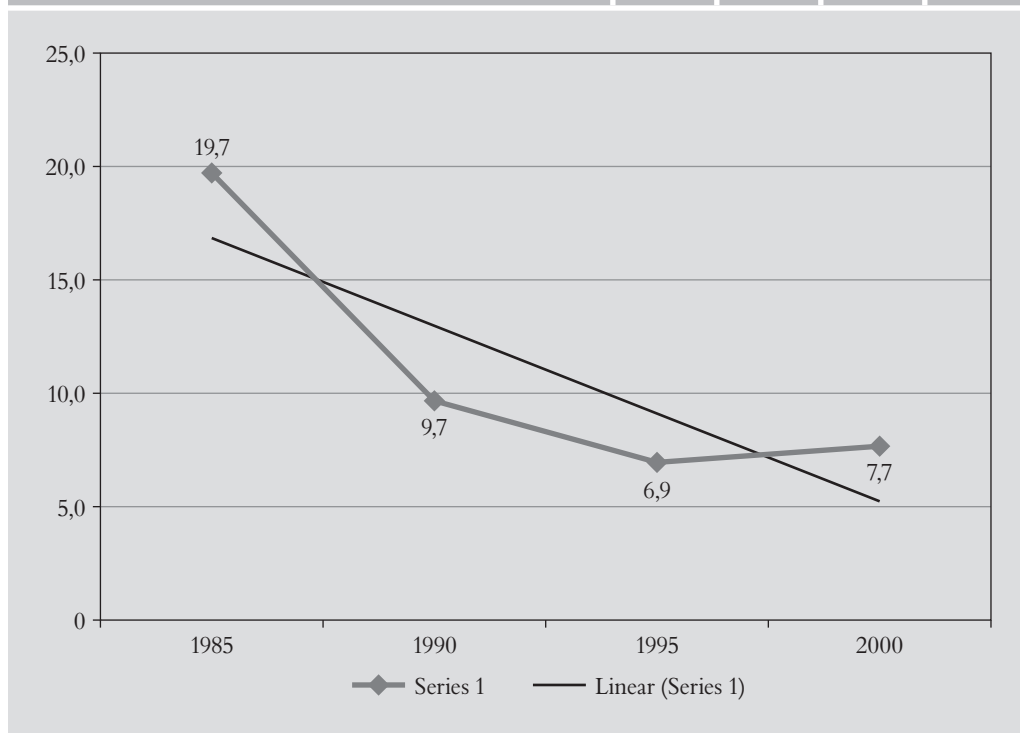
Source: Budget National de la République Centrafricaine (in millions of FCFA).

Captain Paul Barril, a former member of the French anti-terrorism unit (ICG 2007:13). It is likely that the cost of this private security for the president was off-budget. The cost of the PMC that recently arrived in the CAR is likely to be off-budget as well.

Third, data on military expenditure do not include expenditure on armed forces other than national expenditure. A multitude of regional or foreign interventions were assembled in the last two decades, including a UN peacekeeping force in 1997 and a CEMAC force in 2005 as well as various unilateral external interventions, such as the Libyan and Congolese soldiers who defended Patassé in 2002 and the Chadians who helped Bozizé in 2003. A recent example is the 380 soldiers of the FOMUC who cost 17 million in 2007 (ICG 2007:35).

**Table 2 Evolution of spending on police and defence**

Year	1985	1990	1995	2000
Ministry of Defence	5 362	5 696	6 496	6 657
Ministry of Interior	2 762	2 342	2 379	2 532
<b>Total</b>	<b>10 109</b>	<b>10 028</b>	<b>10 870</b>	<b>11 189</b>
Public security as a percentage of total government expenditure	19,7	9,7	6,9	7,7
<b>Total government expenditure</b>	<b>51 212</b>	<b>103 344</b>	<b>156 749</b>	<b>144 527</b>



Source: Budget National de la République Centrafricaine (in millions of FCFA).

In spite of these three constraints, the data that are available point to a significant relative fall in expenditure for the defence sector. The funding for public security allocated both to the ministries of the interior and defence has declined from 19,7 per cent of the national government expenditure in 1985 to less than 8 per cent in 2000 (see table 2). There is no direct link between the input of financial resources into public security and the output in terms of capability or security. How money translates into output depends on what the money is spent on and how the purchased resources are managed and used. However, military expenditure data are conceptually valid indicators of government priorities, in that they can serve as evidence of the relative priorities of government regarding security and non-security aspects.

Apart from the drop in the level of spending on public security, and a concomitant drop in the provision of security by the state, other weaknesses have appeared in the security structure. The government pays low salaries to the police, gendarmerie and armed forces. At times salaries are not paid at all for months, creating a fertile environment for corruption and unrest. Conflict over unpaid salaries resulted in mutiny by soldiers in Bangui on no less than three occasions, namely in 1996 and 1997 and again in 2001. Both the police and gendarmerie are notorious for deficient equipment and training and because co-ordination between the two public security providers is pretty poor, the *Garde présidentielle* is often called in to deal with any matters extending beyond mere traffic accidents. The official name of the Presidential Guards is *Bataillon de protection et de sécurité des institutions* and they are not only better paid than the rest of the armed forces, but also better armed, supplied with better equipment and are better trained. This elite corps consists of 800 men (ICG 2007:15) and it is perhaps not surprising that its expenses are not shown in the national budget. They have the status of a personal militia, and may be regarded as a paramilitary loyalist force that takes orders from the president only. It seems plausible to argue that the *Garde présidentielle* is hardly a part of public security and in the case of the CAR it seems that the argument of Clapham (1999:44), that national security forces that are hijacked by an unrepresentative government for its own gain should be considered as private security, holds good. It is beyond the scope of this article to ask whether the present government is indeed unrepresentative, but the president's *Garde présidentielle* does occupy a grey area in the security sector. What is more, the availability of new commercial networks and increased fears of the consolidation of internal rebels, have been seized as an opportunity for hiring another layer of soldiers for the president's personal protection.

Traditional institutions of public security are frail. The weakening of public security forces, sometimes part of a tactic to neutralise internal threats and reinforce a shadow state (Reno 1995), is a noticeable feature that highlights the limits of the policy shaped by successive governments. It should be added that it has been encouraged by policy incentives of the International Monetary Fund for cuts in public sector spending – usually of employees and their salaries – during the last two decades.

The question that begs an answer in view of the above is whether, if there is an increase in private security and a decline in public security forces, a market for force produced significant 'externalities', one of which was the weakening of public armed forces (Leander 2005a:615)? Is there a direct line of causation in specific cases, such as in the CAR, that clearly shows that private security weakens public security? Evidence of such a direct shift from public to private security would for example be that either funding or recruitment has moved from one sector to the other, in a substitution effect (Leander 2005a:615-616). A second factor would be employment opportunities offered by government. However, employment opportunities have increased in the private sector as a result of improved economic conditions. The fact that labour is mostly drawn from a young, abundantly available pool of human resources, is hardly an argument for the shift either. Based on the available data for these two variables, it is difficult to draw a conclusion about an externality.

An alternative externality could be studied in what Leander calls the 'Swiss cheese' security coverage (Leander 2005a:617) or an induced increase in the skewed distribution of security forces. This is the case in the northern part of the CAR, which has seemingly been abandoned by the armed forces. Here the state indeed stops at PK 12, as Bierschenk and De Sardan (1997) put it. In parts of the north-west of the CAR, an area where no private firms operate, the APRD rebel group enjoys a degree of sovereignty that allows it to fight its own battle against the *zaraguinas* (a group of masked bandits who terrorise inhabitants in the area) without interference. It attacks their bases (Bilakaré 2007), controls the kidnapping of *zaraguinas* for ransom (Africa Confidential 2007:25), and even executes them. Here the skewed distribution of security forces has resulted in the rebels taking over the role of the government. Clearly, the presence of private security is confined to the capital or very few locations in the countryside. The PSC that provides services in Bakouma is available only for those who can afford its services. There is also local market for force which provides selective services for some clients.

It is difficult to show that PSCs have made a crucial contribution to the perpetuation of the skewed or patchy security coverage. On the other hand, they have not contributed to reversing the trend. In an effort to correct this situation, an old project to restructure the army was approved by the European Union. For a sum of €7 million army barracks are to be built in each of the six military regions, which will result in a permanent presence of 500 to 600 men in each of the regions. The army would then have a more evenly distributed territorial presence.

Although there is insufficient data to provide incontrovertible evidence that the security situation in the CAR was the result of external factors (chief among them being the presence of PSCs), there is clearly a relationship between private and public security at the local level. The weakening of government armed forces in the CAR is only in part the result of the rise of a local market for private security forces. However, there is no

doubt that a growing private security sector potentially erodes the status of government security forces. As a result, more fundamental questions about sovereignty, transparency and accountability inevitably arise.

## Local dynamics

Some remarks are necessary to illustrate the relevance of these findings. First of all, with regard to the origin of the local private security firms, it should be noted that in contrast to most of the scholarly literature, which is based on mercenaries or companies acting outside their countries of origin (Mandel 2002:11), the companies I studied are mostly local firms that provide security within the borders of the country itself. There are two firms which, although they operate in the CAR, do not qualify for the local label. One of the companies has considerable international connections – it serves foreign clients and its management is entirely foreign – so, in spite of its local registration, it can hardly be described as indigenous. The second exception is the firm that protects the president: its origins are South African, and it is furthermore the only PMC (in contrast to PSC) that I came across in my research. It is worthy of note that the use of this PMC represents a strategic shift and furthermore it represents a privatisation of the services originally provided by the *Garde présidentielle*. As such it is symptomatic of a weak-state ruler pursuing a warlord strategy (Reno 1999:218). With increased threats surrounding him, the weak-state ruler reinforces private international power bases rather than investing in state institutions and bureaucracy.

Apart from these two exceptions, most of the security sector can be said to have well-established local roots, a conclusion supported by the analysis of recruited personnel above.

A second point concerns the discourse of private security actors, which showed a distinctly biased interpretation of events related to Darfur. This was evident in interviews with the representatives of all the firms. On the one hand, descriptions often concerned the looting and destruction that had taken place during the 1996/97 army mutinies and drew on the unprecedented scale of destruction that occurred in Bangui during the coup of 2003. The same Chadian mercenaries who helped President Bozizé rise to power pillaged both Bangui and the Ouham-Pendé region; machinery from the cotton factories were dismantled and sold, as were hundreds of vehicles of the *Société Cotonnière Centrafricaine*, while the property of even hospitals and missionaries was not spared. On the other hand, the spill-over of violence from Darfur was often described as an element which resulted in more insecurity in the CAR in general and particularly in the town of Bangui. According to the representatives, this meant that security had become even more problematic and required increased investments.

This bias has two implications. The first is that one could assimilate the discourse in the techno-managerial vocabulary of security (Leander 2005a:618) that aims at depoliticising

security. The discourse of the private sector creates the risk of a vicious circle where the supply pushes demand (Leander 2002:9, Singer 2003:357–360, Leander 2005a) in which private firms in other words create their own market. Private contractors have to convince clients (eg governments) that the threats they are specialised in dealing with are the most imminent, the most real and the most important threats (Leander 2005a:612). It is debatable whether non-state actors can be influenced by such discourse. In their analysis of the local security situation – which precedes and informs their hiring of a PSCs or renewal of a contract – they examine a variety of sources. However, if the discourse is acknowledge, then there is a danger of self-perpetuation of supply.

The second implication is that it entails a reconfiguration of international political opinions at the micro-level. Chad and the CAR did suffer from some attacks launched from Darfur, but claiming that violence in the CAR spread from Darfur is an exaggeration. Security risks in the CAR are mostly related to *zaraguinas*, *Garde présidentielle* razzias or rebel activity that is distinct from the Darfur dynamics. Furthermore, a break in the chain of command of the APRD spiralled into a number of uncontrolled incidents and revenges (interview with rebel spokesman, Kaga Bandoro, in June 2007). As Marchal (2007:20) noted, ‘incidents in the Central African Republic and Chad have nothing to do with Sudan’. The micro-dynamics in the discourse of the private sector are also reflected in world views in which commentators linked the situation in Chad and the CAR to Darfur, for example in statements in the *New York Times* (9 July 2007) that ‘the cancer spread into Chad and the Central African Republic’ and ‘Genocidal violence extended into Chad and Central African Republic’ (Reeves 2008). Seemingly, numerous incidents occurring in Chad and the CAR were linked to the ‘genocide in Darfur’.

## Conclusion

Although private security firms scarcely present the ultimate solution to solving wider conflicts, the study of the sector is relevant in African weak states where forces that operate outside the formal state boundaries play increasingly important roles. The growth of a local private security industry is a phenomenon that developed during the last two decades. The reliance on a local market can be shown to have some degree of externality on the traditional institutions that provide public security, but the relation between the two involves more than a simple trade-off. Underlying issues of eroded sovereignty and transparency and regulation of the industry are beyond the scope of this paper but are important and deserve more study.

In this article I tried to show that in the CAR, the private security sector constitutes a rising and local component of the ailing security sector, that it has a discourse, and that it represents an informal political and commercial network distinct from state institutions.

## Notes

- 1 This is according to the International Crisis Group, which quotes a press release by Abakar Sabone, published on the icicemac.com website. (State International Crisis Group reference: République Centrafricaine: anatomie d'un État fantôme Rapport Afrique, 136, 13 décembre 2007.)
- 2 The CAR boasts a great variety of natural resources, including gold, uranium, copper and alluvial diamonds. Oil was discovered in the northeast (EIU 2004).
- 3 The information in this and the next paragraph was obtained by means of interviews with a number of members of PSCs during May 2007.
- 4 A report in *La Lettre du Continent* (13 September 2007, No 524:6) also mentions contacts between Israel and the CAR for a mining and military deal.
- 5 The term refers in general to the process in the urbanised Western countries but is also used elsewhere (cf C Spearin, quoted in Singer (2003) and Avant (2005)).

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