



Opening Remarks
Chargé d’Affaires David Brown
Martin Luther King Center, U.S. Embassy Bangui
February 6, 2015

Dear media colleagues: Thank you for coming to the U.S. Embassy this morning. As I like to remind you, both our Deputy Chief of Mission and myself have worked for media companies in the past. We deeply appreciate the importance of the Fourth Estate, i.e. the press, in an emerging democracy like the CAR and commend you for your bravery and professionalism in covering events during these troubled times.

Our big news today is that we are reopening the Martin Luther King Center later this month, on February 17. We will be taking appointments of one-hour increments. This will ensure that there is no overcrowding and that we have the best user experience possible for each individual visitor, with Internet and other learning resources always available.

After a closure of several months, we will be welcoming back students and the general public to learn about the United States through both English and French-language materials. It could hardly be a more appropriate time to reopen our Center, coming just a couple weeks after the birthday of Martin Luther King on January 15, and during this month of February, which is Black History Month in the United States. As you can see on our walls, there are posters with four of the famous African-Americans to mark this month. Back in the State Department in Washington, our own library there is named after Ralph Bunche, who is probably the most famous African-American diplomat in our history after former Secretaries of State Colin Powell and Condoleeza Rice. And, of course, the entrance of our embassy is adorned with the photo of Barack Obama, our first African-American President, and a man who -- like many Central Africans -- had a parent who was Christian and a parent who was Muslim.

Before I came to Bangui in September to lead our team in reopening the U.S. Embassy here toward normal operations, I visited the memorial of Martin Luther King on the Mall in Washington, D.C. I made this pilgrimage on purpose, on a beautiful summer day, because I knew that I would be coming to the Central African Republic and I wanted also to pray for your country and seek inspiration from the model that Dr. King was.

Dr. King was not only a giant in American history, but also in the pantheon of world history, along with other greats like Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela who followed the golden rule of loving their neighbors and seeking non-violent change.

Dr. King, Gandhi, and Mandela can, and should, be models for all Central Africans, men and women, boys and girls, Christians and Muslims, to seek the road of reconciliation and of peace. There has been so much suffering here, so many killings, so many rapes, so many destroyed homes, so many ruined lives.

But as Dr. King said: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” He also said that “Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into friend.” And finally -- and this speaks to the imperative of reconciliation -- that: “I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear.”

If Dr. King were here today, together with us at this library that bears his name, he would be 85 years old. He would also have much wisdom to share, including not letting us forget that forgiveness means forgiveness, but at the same time does not mean allowing impunity. As Martin Luther King famously put it, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

As we consider the situation here in the Central African Republic, we are faced with a situation where armed groups, including the Seleka, the anti-Balaka, and secret elements of both retired and active duty FACA, and even some gendarmes and police, have been involved in, and hold responsibility for, killings and other violence here. It is time for them to stop immediately. Through their representatives, they need to come to negotiating tables to discuss fully implementing the existing Brazzaville Accord on Cessation of Hostilities, and to conclude political and disarmament agreements with the CAR Transitional Government, supported by the nation's stakeholders, the Mediator President Sassou-Nguesso of the Republic of the Congo, and the broader international community. To the extent possible, these talks should take place on CAR's soil, not in N'Djamena, not in Malabo, not in Brazzaville, not in Nairobi, and not in Pointe Noire.

Along with representatives of the CAR government and the G-8, I had the opportunity to meet with Seleka representatives from the FPRC, RPRC, and UPC during November 4-6 visits to Kaga Bandoro, Bambari, and Bria. To a man, every Seleka leader said that they wanted to participate in the Bangui Forum. None threatened partition. Nourredine Adam, for example, told us that he wanted his FPRC to be represented at the Bangui Forum and that after it he would be willing to disarm under the right conditions.

It was with profound disappointment, however, that elements of the FPRC attempted in late January to disrupt the grassroots dialogue, which are an on-going, historical, and entirely positive effort to listen to the voices of the CAR people not only in Bangui, but in every one of this nation's 71 prefectures and sub-prefectures.

If the FPRC is to have any remaining credibility in future peace talks, it needs to stop immediately any further obstruction to the grassroots dialogue. Instead, Djotodia, Adam, and the rest of the FPRC leadership should encourage their faithful to join their fellow citizens in expressing their views at these grassroots dialogues about the future of the country. There will also be workshops about the future constitutional referendum, hopefully in many towns within CAR, including the north and the west. Again, armed groups should end their violent activities, turn their swords into plowshares, and participate actively in the grassroots dialogue, the Bangui Forum, and the future debate on the constitution.

Moreover, former CAR President Francois Bozize and former CAR Transitional President Michel Djotodia, have unique opportunities to play constructive roles in the future of their nation. Not as candidates, because their time has passed, but instead as elder statesmen, as former heads of state. They should be out front, publically calling for reconciliation and peace, just as Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King heroically did.

With this, my colleagues, I would be happy to answer any of your questions.