

Killings at CAR hospital was part of robbery by heavily armed ex-rebels

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USPA News - Violence at a hospital in the Central African Republic over the weekend, in which at least 16 people were killed, including three aid workers, was carried out by a group of heavily armed ex-rebels as part of an armed robbery, officials said on Monday. The attack happened on Saturday when dozens of heavily armed men attacked a 115-bed hospital run by Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), also known as Doctors Without Borders, in the northwestern town of Nanga Boguila, located between the cities of Bossangoa and Bozoum.

A government official had earlier said at least 18 people were killed, but MSF put the number of fatalities at 16. MSF spokesman Tim Shenk said the attack occurred when 40 community leaders were holding a meeting at the facility to discuss medical access and care. He said ex-Seleka rebels surrounded the hospital and, while some of the gunmen robbed the MSF office and fired shots into the air, other gunmen attacked the meeting. "Armed men approached the meeting place where MSF staff and community members had gathered together on benches. Unprovoked, the men fired heavily into the crowd, killing and critically wounding meeting participants," Shenk said. He could not say how many people were injured, but the government official in the capital Bangui had earlier said 15 local chiefs were among those killed. Saturday's attack forced MSF to withdraw key staff members and suspend activities in Boguila, though the aid agency said it remains committed to providing humanitarian assistance to the community. "In reaction to this unconscionable act, we are also examining whether it is feasible to continue operations in other areas," said Stefano Argenziano, MSF head of mission in the Central African Republic. MSF has worked in the Central African Republic since 1997, with currently more than 300 international staff members and more than 2,000 local staff. It is the only international humanitarian organization working in the Boguila area to assist the local population, which has been exposed to increasingly deadly and indiscriminate attacks by armed groups. The 115-bed hospital in Boguila, along with seven nearby health posts supported by MSF teams, dispense primary and secondary health care to approximately 45,000 people in the region. Each month, between 9,000 and 13,000 general consultations are carried out, and between 5,000 and 10,000 people are treated for malaria, MSF said. "We are extremely shocked and saddened by the brutal violence used against our medical staff and the community," Argenziano said, describing the attack as appalling. "Our first priority is to treat the wounded, notify family members, and to secure the safety of our staff, patients, and the hospital." Saturday's attack followed an incident in Nanga Boguila on the evening of April 11, when fighting erupted between troops belonging to the African-led International Support Mission known as MISCA and local armed forces. The fighting, that included a large explosion and sustained gunfire, prompted some 7,000 civilians to flee the town. The current crisis in the African country began in December 2012 when mainly Muslim Seleka rebels seized large parts of the country, but recent months have seen unprecedented violence between Christians and Muslims. The conflict - in a country of just 4.4 million people - has prompted more than 290,000 people to flee to neighboring countries in search of refuge and left 650,000 people internally displaced. Thousands of people have been killed in the recent violence and escalating atrocities, including about 100 people who died in the town of Sagani in Nana-Mambere prefecture earlier this month during confrontations between civilians and militias. The Central African Republic has been through a series of coups and revolts since its independence from France in 1960. Located next to Cameroon, the African country is one of the poorest in the world, despite considerable agricultural, water and mineral resources. But corruption is rife and undermines the timber and diamond industries.

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