

## In the Central African Republic “true peace is the absence of poverty”

In the wake of the peace agreement signed last year, marking the end of years-long strife, the Central African Republic is on its way to holding presidential elections. The first round of elections will take place on December 27. If no candidate achieves a landslide victory, the second round will be held in February/March 2021. The election falls within the path of pacification of the country that Pope Francis mentioned during the Meeting for Peace at Rome's Capitol Hill on October 20, praying for the many conflicts worldwide. In this country in the heart of Africa with 5 million inhabitants, where a conflict between Seleka (Islamist) and anti-Balaka (Christian) rebels had been ongoing since 2013, things are now progressing relatively peacefully, at least in the capital Bangui. As in many other African countries, the coronavirus fortunately did not have a tragic impact, with 4,866 cases and 62 deaths since the outbreak of the pandemic. Nevertheless, its endemic challenges remain unsolved: poverty, shortage of health and education facilities and undereducation. There are 641,000 internally displaced persons and 622,000 refugees in other African countries, about half of them in Cameroon, the others in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Chad and Sudan. The UN peacekeeping mission MINUSCA is still operating in the country. In this context emerges the absence of a strong State, one that takes initiatives for the good of the people, an aspect highlighted by Father **Federico Trincherio**, a Discalced Carmelite, serving in Bangui for the past 10 years.



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both in cities and villages, with evangelization and human promotion activities, with thousands of students in schools. Father Trincherio, born in Casale Monferrato, Italy, is the spiritual director of the Carmel monastery community in Bimbo, on the outskirts of the capital. He is in charge of the formation of dozens of young seminarians. The monastery extends over 130 hectares of agricultural land. A farming school will be opened here in a few days, under a major project financed with the Italian Bishops' Conference 8-per-thousand tax contributions. "It's a small step to make people understand that the development of a country also depends on agriculture," he told SIR from Bangui. "We would like to recuperate those young people who dropped out of school and help them acquire the skills to become small-scale agricultural entrepreneurs." **At the political level "the country is somewhat on stand-by** waiting for the elections", the missionary remarked. "There were no attacks with victims in recent weeks - he said - Even though we are constantly reminded that three quarters of the Country is controlled by the rebels, we are experiencing a relatively quiet phase. In Bangui, life goes on as usual." Even religious tensions seem to have been resolved but "Muslim families have not yet returned in a number of areas": "The religious geography has been redrawn by the conflict." **This "doesn't imply true peace and security** - he added - The problems of the Central African Republic remain, notably the absence of a strong and influential government. Although there are no more clashes and casualties, the State still has no control over the country, amidst widespread underdevelopment and poverty. Finding a way to overcome poverty is hard." The only positive sign in Bangui, he said, is the opening of numerous construction sites employing manual labour. "But things have not changed much compared to before," he pointed out, "In other African countries that I visited there is a new outlook, with governments taking initiatives in spite of the difficulties." **The people hoped** that a democratically elected president (in 2016) would lead to some more positive developments. A number of former presidents are running again for the December 27 elections, the term of office will last five years. But there are no notable and charismatic figures. "I hope that

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whoever wins will be capable of loving this country", concluded Father Trinchero. "For too many years the focus was exclusively on personal interests, and people are getting tired of this situation. The general perception is that everything here depends on international issues, in economic activities and other matters alike."

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