

Woman to lead embattled Central African Republic as new president

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Jan. 21 (GIN) – To the sound of cheers from the National Assembly building, the Transitional National Council of the Central African Republic on Monday tapped Catherine Samba-Panza, mayor of the capital city of Bangui, to be the country's interim President and first woman to hold the post.

As the new leader of a country gripped by a ferocious sectarian war, Catherine Samba-Panza, 58, issued a call to the fighting groups, asking her "children, especially the anti-Balaka, to put down their arms and stop all the fighting. The same goes for the ex-Seleka. . . I don't want to hear any more talk of murders and killings.

"Starting today, I am the president of all Central Africans, without exclusion."

Born in Chad to a Cameroonian father and Central African mother, Samba-Panza is a former businesswoman, corporate lawyer, and insurance broker. She also led a reconciliation effort during a previous civil war.

Paul Simon Handy, of the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) in South Africa, called her "a president who can unite both the country and the political elite" but warned: "I am afraid that this process will take longer than her period in office as interim president."

The Central African Republic has been devastated by brutal fighting since a coup in March 2013 removed the unpopular president Francois Bozize. He was replaced by Michel Djotodia who suspended the constitution. Djotodia resigned this month under intense international pressure as the death toll mounted to over 1000 people and observers feared a genocide was in the works.

According to a New York Times report, "The state no longer exists in the CAR. Civil servants do

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not go to their offices, taxes are not collected, all the schools are closed. There is no budget, no army, no police force, no Parliament, no judges, no jails.”

Against these odds, Samba-Panza, no political novice, ran a successful campaign and beat seven other candidates for the post. Among them were two women and two sons of former presidents.

Now, her primary task will be to prepare the nation for elections in the coming year. In addition she will need to temper the extreme animosity between the Christian and Muslim groups in the country.

Central African Republic has to hold a fresh election by February 2015 at the latest. France, however, wants the election to be held this year. Current law excludes the interim president from running.

“Everything we have been through has been the fault of men,” said Marie-Louise Yakemba, in a press interview. Yakemba, who heads a civil-society organization that brings together people of different faiths, added: “We think that with a woman, there is at least a ray of hope.”