

CONFLICT-RELATED SEXUAL VIOLENCE MULTI-PARTNER TRUST FUND

UN TEAM OF EXPERTS ON THE RULE OF LAW AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN CONFLICT

INTERIM NARRATIVE REPORT COVER PAGE

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¹ The term “project” is used for projects, programmes and joint programmes

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Interim Narrative Report Central African Republic

I. Background

Since December 2013, the Central African Republic (CAR) has experienced violent conflict and its institutions have been in deep crisis. Conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) has been a prominent feature of the criminality engaged in by the different parties to the conflict³ and persistent widespread impunity has contributed to cycles of violence. Insecurity and weak national institutions are major factors affecting the ability of national rule of law institutions to investigate and prosecute perpetrators of serious crimes, including CRSV. In his last annual report to the Security Council on CRSV, the Secretary-General reported that “[a]rmed groups have consistently, and with flagrant impunity, used sexual violence as a tactic of war in the Central African Republic.”⁴

In 2019, in order to bring a durable end to the crisis and reduce violence, the Government of CAR and 14 non-state armed groups signed the Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in the Central African Republic (APPR-RCA) under the auspices of the African Initiative for Peace and Reconciliation in CAR, led by the African Union (AU) and supported by the United Nations. The APPR-RCA recognizes that impunity has been a key driver of the conflict, establishes the fight against impunity as one of the core principles the parties must implement to ensure lasting peace and also calls on the parties to the agreement to stop perpetrating sexual violence.⁵

These developments led the current Government to reaffirm its commitment to addressing CRSV, specifically by signing a new Joint Communiqué on the prevention and fight against CRSV⁶ with the United Nations during the visit of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict (SRSV-SVC) to CAR in 2019. In this Joint Communiqué, the government specifically committed to several justice sector outcomes, including:

- Fighting against impunity by bringing the perpetrators of sexual violence to justice and ensuring access to justice for victims;
- Allocating sufficient resources and providing political support to the Joint Rapid Response and Prevention Unit for Sexual Violence against Women and Children (*Unité Mixte d’Intervention Rapide et de Répression des violences faites aux femmes et aux enfants*, hereinafter the UMIRR);
- Ensuring victims’ access to reparations, including guarantees of non-repetition; and
- Excluding perpetrators of sexual violence from amnesty measures.

³ *Report of the Mapping Project documenting serious violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law committed within the territory of the Central African Republic between January 2003 and December 2015*, MINUSCA, UNDP, OHCHR, OSRSG-SVC, May 2017, p. 214.

⁴ Report of the Secretary-General on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (S/2019/280), 29 March 2019, para. 35.

⁵ *Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in the Central African Republic*, S/2019/145, 15 February 2019.

⁶ *Communiqué conjoint entre la République centrafricaine et l’Organisation des Nations unies : Prévention et lutte contre les violences sexuelles liées au conflit*, 31 mai 2019, para. 1.8-1.15, available at <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/joint-communication/joint-communication-of-the-central-african-republic-and-the-united-nations-on-prevention-and-response-to-crsv/20190531-Joint-Communique-of-Govt-of-CAR-and-UN.pdf> (last visited 19 February 2020).

This Joint Communiqué updates the previous engagements taken by CAR authorities in 2012, when the United Nations had signed two previous Joint Communiqués to strengthen the prevention and response to CRSV with the Government of CAR and with the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Steering Committee of CAR.

Within this framework, and as part of the successive United Nations Joint Justice Projects in CAR⁷, the United Nations Team of Experts on the Rule of Law and Sexual Violence in Conflict (Team of Experts) has identified and supported the implementation of several activities aimed at strengthening the security and judicial response to CRSV in CAR since 2012. These activities included: the development of public perception surveys of the security and judicial responses to sexual violence; the initial conception of a judicial database, containing specific information on CRSV cases; the provision of inputs to the draft law on the creation of a Special Criminal Court (SCC);⁸ and the creation and operationalization of the Joint Rapid Response and Prevention Unit for Sexual Violence against Women and Children, better known by its French acronym UMIRR.⁹

The Team of Experts has also recruited a Technical Specialist who is embedded in MINUSCA's Justice and Corrections Section (MINUSCA-JCS) and works notably with MINUSCA's police component, Human Rights component, and UNDP to oversee the implementation of the projects of the Team of Experts. This expert provides ongoing mentoring and technical support to the UMIRR and liaises regularly with the Special Prosecutor, magistrates, and Special Judicial Police Unit of the SCC, as well as with prosecutors of the ordinary justice system, to ensure that CRSV cases are investigated and prosecuted.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had a detrimental impact on certain aspects of the rule of law response in CAR, including accountability for CRSV. The pandemic particularly impacted the capacity of victims to report crimes and access justice, and significantly slowed the ability of law enforcement to investigate, and of judicial authorities to prosecute and adjudicate crimes of sexual violence. In 2020, no new criminal sessions of the Courts of Appeal were organized. The trials that could still be held were organized in compliance with strict social distancing guidelines and were limited to the most essential and urgent matters.

An additional challenging factor in 2020 was the security situation in the country which became increasingly unstable around the first round of presidential and legislative elections on 27 December 2020. Indeed, following the decision of the Constitutional Court on 3 December to disqualify former President François Bozizé from taking part in the upcoming presidential elections, the latter reportedly mobilized a coalition of armed groups named the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC).¹⁰ The CPC notably launched a number of attacks, including against the capital Bangui,¹¹ and its members are suspected of having committed a number of human rights violations.¹² Following the presidential and legislative elections, MINUSCA has documented allegations of

⁷ Currently, the Team of Experts contributes with MINUSCA and UNDP to the implementation of the Joint Project titled "*Project to support the restoration of the rule of law and the reform of the justice and security sectors in CAR*", covering the period 2020-2023. In particular, the Team of Experts will focus on supporting the implementation of the third output of the Joint Project, aimed at improving women's access to justice and security, including through the prosecution, investigation and adjudication of sexual and gender-based violence cases.

⁸ The SCC is a national court established to investigate and prosecute serious crimes committed in CAR since 1 January 2003. Further information on the SCC can be found online at <https://www.cps-rca.cf/> (last visited 10 March 2021).

⁹ The UMIRR is a specialized unit composed of police and gendarmes mandated to investigate sexual violence crimes.

¹⁰ France 24, *Centrafrique : le gouvernement accuse l'ex-président Bozizé de fomenter un coup d'État*, 19 December 2020, available at : <https://www.france24.com/fr/afrique/20201219-centrafrique-le-gouvernement-accuse-l-ex-pr%C3%A9sident-boziz%C3%A9-de-fomenter-un-coup-d-%C3%A9tat>.

¹¹ Deutsche Welle, *Central African Republic: Rebels launch attack on capital*, 13 January 2021, available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/central-african-republic-rebels-launch-attack-on-capital/a-56215853>.

¹² Report of the Secretary-General on the Central African Republic, S/2021/146, 16 February 2021, para. 57-61.

CRSV by the CPC, as well as by the national armed forces (FACA).¹³ Separately, the last report of the Panel of Experts reported on a number of human rights violations, including CRSV, perpetrated by the FACA. Following the deterioration of the security situation, a curfew has been implemented since 7 January and President Touadera declared a nationwide state of emergency since 21 January 2021.

Despite these challenges, the Team of Experts was able to progress in delivering on many of its key objectives¹⁴ and to move accountability for CRSV forward together with its key partners, especially by building strategic partnerships with essential stakeholders. Indeed, during the reporting period, the Team notably built strong partnerships with relevant UN and national entities, ensuring consistent support to the delivery of the justice response to CRSV, in line with the outputs and objectives identified by the project. The Team of Experts also liaised closely with the stakeholders of the National Justice Sector Policy adopted on 12 December 2019, which provides a roadmap for the reform of the justice system for the next five years, especially through the participation of the Technical Specialist in the Working Groups on the Strengthening of the Criminal Justice Chain and on Human Rights and Transitional Justice. This ensured that the project was implemented in a coordinated fashion increasing its impact and reducing the potential for duplication.

II. Objective/Outputs

The project was designed to strengthen the capacity of the national authorities to work collaboratively to investigate and adjudicate CRSV cases in order to deliver justice and respond adequately to the demands of the people of the CAR. Through this project, the Team of Experts helped to ensure justice and accountability for the crimes committed, contributed to the strengthening of rule of law institutions, and promoted peace and security in the CAR.

Through this project, based on a context-specific and victim/survivor-centered approach, the Team of Experts continued to assist the Government of CAR to implement the UN Security Council's agenda on Women, Peace and Security, as well as the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Indeed, the project contributed to the realization of the Goal 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions, particularly by promoting the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensuring equal access to justice for all (SDG target 16.3). It also promoted the implementation of the Goal 5 on gender equality and empowerment of women and girls, by supporting the elimination of all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation (SDG target 5.2).

III. Progress/Results

The project has been implemented jointly by the Team of Experts, UNDP and MINUSCA, as part of the United Nations Joint Justice Projects¹⁵ in Bangui. The project's activities have been led and conducted directly by the Technical Specialist deployed in MINUSCA-JCS. Additional operational challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the deterioration of the security context, further slowed the implementation of the project.

In response to the risks posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Technical Specialist worked remotely between 19 March and 9 September 2020. In the meantime, to continue supporting the needs of survivors, the Team of Experts utilized a variety of tools and technologies, such as conference calls, web-based video conferencing tools, cloud storage and document management, to engage with colleagues and partners in the field level and

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ See section III. *Progress/Results* of this report.

¹⁵ See *supra* note 5.

ensure the provision of technical advice to the relevant law enforcement and judicial authorities. Since the return of the Technical Specialist to Bangui, the implementation of activities resumed, in line with the existing social distancing rules and regulations, as well as under the curfew restrictions.

OUTPUT 1: The capacity of CAR investigative authorities to investigate CRSV is enhanced

Activity 1.1 – Train and mentor police investigators and police officers (Officiers de Police Judiciaire and Agents de Police Judiciaire) serving in the SCC¹⁶, the UMIRR and the sexual violence desks of police stations, particularly on investigation techniques, communication with and support for victims, case analysis and referral systems

The Technical Specialist, with the support of the broader Team of Experts, and two police specialists conducted a series of mentoring sessions and two practical trainings on interview techniques, targeting especially the newest staff of the UMIRR in January and February 2020. In total, forty-nine judicial police officers benefitted from these mentoring sessions and practical trainings, including seven women.

The two one-day long on-site mentoring sessions were conducted by the two police specialists, under the supervision of the Technical Specialist. The first session was aimed at improving the participants' capacity to manage the records of the UMIRR (including the record of complaints filed in front of the UMIRR and the custody register). The second session's objective was to improve the participants' practical understanding of the national rules and procedures, as well as of the international standards, relating to police custody. The main methodologies used were group mentoring, case studies, practical exercises, and group discussions. In total, twenty-six personnel of the UMIRR attended these mentoring sessions.

The two practical trainings on interview techniques that followed allowed twenty-three participants, including nineteen judicial police officers of the UMIRR as well as four judicial police officers from the Directorate of the Judicial Police and Gendarmerie's Research and Investigation Department (SRI), to be trained on interview techniques to be used in CRSV cases with victims, witnesses as well as alleged perpetrators. The trainings were led by the Technical Specialist together with two police specialists, and several external co-trainers, in order to foster synergies between the participants and a variety of different actors that are also providing support to victims of sexual violence in CAR.

The first practical training was aimed at providing an overview of trends of the sexual violence cases, including CRSV, in CAR as well as of the national legal framework applicable to the investigation of these crimes. Each session of this training started with a presentation followed by discussions. The second practical training was designed to allow the participants to improve their techniques for interviewing victims of sexual violence, while having the opportunity to practice these techniques in a safe environment. After introducing the specific interview techniques, group exercises were carried out to practice these techniques. In addition, several sessions of this training were dedicated to the analysis of anonymized police reports prepared by judicial police officers of the UMIRR, to help the participants improve their capacity to produce clear and precise police reports.

The mentoring sessions and practical trainings not only allowed the participants to improve their interview techniques, their understanding of the legal framework applicable to sexual violence crimes in CAR, and of the national rules and procedures, as well as of the international standards, relating to police custody, but the exchanges held during the sessions also allowed the officers of these different units of the police and

¹⁶ These trainings will complement the trainings for the judicial police officers of the SCC on international criminal investigations planning, analysis and interviewing techniques as well as trainings planned by UNPOL, as part of the Joint Project on Support for the SCC.

gendarmerie to build valuable connections and a better understanding of their respective mandates.

Furthermore, the Team of Experts provided technical expertise to support the investigation of CRSV cases pending in front of the UMIRR. In February 2018 and August 2019, the UMIRR launched two investigations outside the city of Bossangoa and near the city of Kaga Bandoro respectively. The first investigation focused on a mass rape incident which concerned 150 victims of CRSV, while the second mission allowed the UMIRR to investigate cases of CRSV allegedly perpetrated by members of armed groups in several locations, totaling 264 victims. As several of the judicial police officers of the UMIRR who worked on both investigations were transferred to other units of the police and gendarmerie through the years, the finalization of the case files had been delayed. Throughout the reporting period, the Team of Experts worked closely with the investigators, the heads of the field criminal investigations, and the director of the UMIRR to ensure that procedural requirements were met, making sure the referral of the case files to the relevant prosecutor's office. By working closely with the national officers, the Team of Experts provided technical advice and gained a better understanding of existing practices, prompting reflection and recommendations regarding the future management of case files. This close follow-up and support allowed for the case file of the investigation conducted in August 2019 to be officially referred to the prosecutor of Kaga-Bandoro's High Court in January 2021. The Team of Experts currently liaises regularly with the Prosecutor to provide any necessary technical expertise relevant to bringing the case swiftly to trial and ensure victim's access to justice.

The Team of Experts, together with MINUSCA and UNDP, also contributed to mentoring the director of the UMIRR on the management of disciplinary matters. Indeed, in March 2020, two alleged perpetrators of rape of minors reportedly escaped from the UMIRR's custody. Given the gravity of the situation, the Team of Experts coordinated with the other UN partners of the UMIRR, particularly MINUSCA and UNDP, to carry out a joint sensitization session to remind the director of his legal obligations under the national legislation and on the overall management of disciplinary matters. Following this concerted effort, the director took all the necessary steps to alert his hierarchy, the relevant judicial authorities and kept UN partners abreast of his endeavors. In addition, the victims of the alleged perpetrators who escaped were informed swiftly and benefited from the support of the UMIRR, including its legal service. The alleged perpetrators were also found and re-arrested shortly after, and disciplinary measures were adopted against the judicial police officers implicated in the escape.

In addition, the Team of Experts contributed to building the capacity of the judicial police officers of the UMIRR to identify and investigate cases of trafficking in persons. Indeed, in 2020, a presidential decree, followed by the adoption of a new national action plan on the fight against trafficking in persons in CAR, expanded the mandate of the UMIRR by making it the victims' main entry point to the national criminal justice system. In order to strengthen the capacity of the UMIRR to implement fully this specific type of crimes, the Team of Experts took part as a co-trainer in the National Training on Trafficking in Persons, organized jointly by the Central African government, International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), held from 25 to 27 February 2020 in Bangui. Fifty-five participants, including twenty-five women, were trained on the best practices to fight against trafficking in persons in CAR. The Technical Specialist of the Team of Experts particularly focused on analyzing with the participants the criminal law procedure linked to the prosecution of trafficking in persons, particularly when related to sexual violence in conflict. This training allowed the UMIRR to be better equipped to start investigating cases of trafficking in persons.

Finally, the Team of Experts led the development of a joint coordination strategy between all the UN entities supporting the UMIRR. Indeed, since the UMIRR became operational, a growing number of UN actors, not necessarily involved in the other coordination mechanisms such as the Joint Justice Project, have collaborated with the UMIRR to contribute to strengthening its capacity, by providing different kinds of technical and/or material support. However, without the use of a coordination mechanism, the risk to duplicate efforts pushed

the key UN entities supporting the UMIRR, in particular MINUSCA, UNDP, and the Team of Experts, to agree on developing an integrated coordination strategy defining their respective roles and responsibilities to support the UMIRR. The strategy was developed and adopted following a series of bilateral and group consultations and is in the process of being fully endorsed by the leadership of each entity represented. The secretariat of the strategy, a group created to lead this network of partners, was also established and will be spearheaded by the Team of Experts at the beginning of the implementation of the strategy. The first meeting of the secretariat is planned in April 2021.

Activity 1.2 – Provide logistical and material support to the UMIRR to conduct investigations.

Since its creation, the ministries of justice and interior, which are currently the ministries responsible for the UMIRR, have provided limited logistical and material support to the UMIRR. Thanks to the joint advocacy carried out by the Team of Experts, MINUSCA and UNDP, the 2020 State budget partially included the UMIRR's operational budget.¹⁷ However, before the absence of fully adequate financing of other basic logistical and material needs of the UMIRR and, consequently, a positive response to the increasing demand were only ensured thanks to the project. In addition, the material support provided through the Team of Experts allowed for the installation of an access ramp to the UMIRR, as well as the construction of interview rooms in the facilities of the UMIRR, especially to offer to victims as much privacy and security as possible when recording their statements in the UMIRR.

Output 2: The capacity of CAR judicial authorities to prosecute and adjudicate CRSV crimes is enhanced

Activity 2.1 – Provide technical advice and support to the ordinary criminal courts and the SCC regarding the prosecution of CRSV cases.

The project's Technical Specialist worked closely with the national judiciary supporting the organization of the second criminal court session of 2019 at the Bangui Court of Appeal. As a result, the Team of Experts ensured that this session would be dedicated to cases of SGBV. The session which was held in December and ended in early 2020 resulted in 22 cases of sexual violence put on the docket out of a total of 25, including six cases that arose from the UMIRR. To support successful proceedings, the Technical Specialist provided specialized mentoring for the officials and victims' representatives related to specific needs of sexual violence victims during judicial proceedings. She also provided a training for the jurors on the existing national legal framework for sexual violence to support adequate deliberations.

The Team of Experts also conducted an advocacy and mentoring session with the prosecutor of Bangui's High-Court to strengthen the responsibility of the prosecutor's office to lead and control the investigations carried out by the UMIRR, in accordance with the national legal framework. Thanks to this activity, the prosecutor appointed a magistrate to become the focal point of the prosecutor's office for the UMIRR. The focal point started working closely with the UMIRR and is working with the Team of Experts to institutionalize regular meetings between the director of the UMIRR and the prosecutor of Bangui's High-Court. This resulted in stronger oversight by judicial authorities on the work of the UMIRR, and ensures the investigations led by the UMIRR are closely guided by the prosecutor's office.

The trainings of the judicial officers (prosecutors and judges) of the ordinary criminal justice and of the SCC that were planned in 2020 had to be postponed until 2021 due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. To circumvent the limitation imposed by COVID restrictions and continue building its engagement and partnership

¹⁷ A total amount of 5.5 million Central African CFA franc for stationery and fuel supplies.

with the judicial actors, particularly the SCC, the Team of Experts produced a webinar featuring, inter alia, the work of the Special Prosecutor.¹⁸ This event held on 17 November, focused on national accountability for CRSV in the Central African Republic and included along with the Special Prosecutor, the First Advocate General of Bangui's Court of Appeal, the Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in CAR, a victims' representatives as well as the research director for Harvard Humanitarian Initiative (HHI). A total of 250 people watched the event live on Zoom and YouTube. The recording, with English subtitles, has been made available to the public and constitutes a unique resource for policymakers, researchers and civil society organizations to learn more about the justice response to sexual violence committed in CAR, and on the impact of this response on peace and security.¹⁹ The webinar also allowed key judicial actors in the national jurisdictions, the SCC, and civil society organizations to be introduced and start building valuable partnerships.

Activity 2.2 – Organize two roundtables bringing together police investigators and prosecutors working on CRSV cases (UMIRR, ordinary courts and the SCC).

Because of the delays caused by the pandemic, the organization of a workshop on the elaboration of a framework (including substantive and procedural rules) organizing the cooperation between the SCC and the UMIRR had to be postponed. As a result, the Team of Experts adapted its prioritization of the project activities planned and seized the opportunity to innovate by carrying out an in-depth diagnostic analysis of the judicial response to CRSV in CAR, to assess and reflect on the progress made and the challenges remaining for law enforcement, especially the UMIRR, the national jurisdictions, and the SCC in the investigation and prosecution of CRSV, while promoting a victim-centered approach. This diagnostic report was developed based on a thorough desk-review, and on-site research, including many interviews with key national judicial authorities, United Nations entities, and civil society organizations.

This significant work led to the finalization of an in-depth assessment with concrete actionable recommendations which provides a roadmap for the government to address accountability gaps for CRSV with the support of the Team of Experts, MINUSCA and UNDP. These include recommendations to adopt clear policies forbidding the re-qualification of criminal acts (e.g., incidents of rape) as misdemeanors or minor offences; revise the code of military justice to align it on international human rights law standards; adopt a prosecutorial strategy prioritizing the prosecution of CRSV; and continue strengthening the capacity of the judicial authorities investigating and prosecuting CRSV.

The report will be officially presented and discussed with the national authorities in a workshop to be held in 2021. The objective of the workshop will be to facilitate the development and adoption of an implementation plan of the recommendations of the report. This plan will help evaluate the justice reform efforts carried out by the Central African authorities to address the fight against impunity for CRSV against clearly established benchmarks.

Activity 2.3 – Develop the capacity to track judicial proceedings involving CRSV

The National Justice Sector Policy prioritized the promotion of information-sharing and coordination between judicial actors, as a means of strengthening the criminal justice chain. Indeed, judicial police officers, prosecutors, and magistrates are facing a number of technical and material challenges that limit their capacity to address CRSV crimes in a coordinated manner. These include the absence of case tracking tools, the lack of

¹⁸ The Digital Dialogue Series is a series of webinars produced by the Team of Experts to allow academics, policymakers and practitioners to have open discussions on the fight against impunity for CRSV and the promotion of an effective survivor-centered justice. All the recordings of the webinars are available here: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLwtZuW_WzXHqt56ULnyhy_MKB72eIgUya.

¹⁹ Ibid.

clear methodology to maintain and update existing case tracking mechanisms, as well as the absence of coordination fora between the various actors of the criminal justice system.

In order to address these issues, a joint workshop was held with the Minister of Justice, UNDP, MINUSCA and the Team of Experts on the challenges limiting the efficient tracking of judicial cases in the UMIRR and the High Courts of Bangui and Bimbo. The main objectives of this workshop were to give the opportunity to all judicial actors involved in the investigation, prosecution and adjudication of conflict-related sexual violence crimes in Bangui and Bimbo to identify together the key challenges limiting the efficient tracking of judicial cases between each institution, as well as within UMIRR and the High Courts. The workshop allowed participants to discuss international best practices and identify and prioritize corrective actions to implement, including technical trainings and the development of coordination mechanisms under the National Justice Sector Policy.

Thanks to the participation of a number of high-level judicial actors, including the Director of the Judicial Services of the Ministry of Justice and the President of the Council of State, the discussions were very rich and allowed for the identification of concrete actions that will be implemented by the national authorities with the support of their partners, including the Team of Experts. In particular, two workshops will be organized by the Team of Experts in 2021. The workshops shall contribute to the sensitization of judicial actors and sexual violence focal points of the High Courts and Courts of Appeal of Bangui and Bimbo on the rules and procedures to be followed to ensure the efficient tracking of judicial files and improve the management of sexual violence cases transferred by the UMIRR to the relevant courts.

Output 3: Access to security and justice in cases of CRSV is made available in specific areas (to be identified), corresponding to an increased perception of trust and protection.

Activity 3.1 – Legal information and legal aid are available to victims of conflict-related sexual violence in specific areas (to be identified).

The findings of the Team of Experts' technical mission in March 2019, as well as the conclusions of the assessment report highlighted that the existing referral pathway within the UMIRR was limiting the effective access to all the victims seeking the support of the UMIRR to the relevant services provided in its facilities,²⁰ particularly to the legal aid service. In addition, since the mandate of the UMIRR was officially expanded to incorporate the fight against trafficking in persons, the referral pathway of the UMIRR had to be adapted to ensure that victims of trafficking could be best identified and referred to the relevant services of the UMIRR. For all these reasons, it appeared essential to strengthen the referral pathway of victims in the UMIRR, notably to ensure the effective access of victims to legal aid.

The national authorities, civil society organizations and UN entities participating in the framework of cooperation of the UMIRR met on 25 November to allow the UMIRR, and their partners, including the Team of Experts, to discuss and plan the restructuring of the internal referral pathway in the UMIRR. Following these discussions, a specific working group, including the Team of Experts, was established to accompany the design and implementation of a new referral pathway in the UMIRR aimed at better addressing the needs of the victims and survivors. The group met on 21 December to agree on an action plan that started being implemented shortly after. Indeed, on 31 December, the Team of Experts along with MINUSCA, Doctors Without Borders (MSF) and IOM organized an initial mentoring session on the screening and orientation of victims arriving at the UMIRR to ensure their specific needs are better addressed. This work has resulted in an improvement of the referral of victims in the UMIRR, particularly for victims of human trafficking, but also contributed to

²⁰ The services include a medical service, psycho-social assistance service, and legal aid service.

strengthening the cooperation between the various services of the UMIRR.

In parallel, it appeared necessary to strengthen the legal information and legal aid services offered to the victims and survivors in the UMIRR. In 2020, the partnership between the UMIRR and the Association of Female Lawyers of the Central African Republic (French acronym AFJC), a non-governmental organization (NGO) that provides two lawyers to the legal aid service of the UMIRR since its creation, was renewed. On this occasion, a workshop was organized by the Team of Experts and UNDP on 9 September 2020 to give the opportunity to the UMIRR and the AFJC to reflect on and take stock of the strengths and weaknesses of the legal services provided to victims and survivors in the UMIRR, identify together avenues for improvement, and agree on actions to implement in order to improve the quality of the legal services offered. Based on the recommendations identified by the participants, a roadmap for their implementation was adopted by all the participants.

Activity 3.2 – Population perceptions and expectations regarding the justice and security institutions actors (police, gendarmerie, judicial institutions, legal aid actors) are measured, analyzed and made available to relevant stakeholders in specific areas (to be identified).

The Team of Experts, with MINUSCA and UNDP, continued providing material and technical support to HHI, for the completion of three new perception surveys that will be carried out between 2019 and 2021. The perception surveys conducted over the past three years with more than thirty thousand people by HHI, in collaboration with the Central African NGO *Echelle - Appui au Développement*, provide important insights on sexual violence and gender-based violence, the restoration of State authority and transitional justice.

The Technical Specialist of the Team of Experts participated in the meetings of the Monitoring Group and of the Informal Advisory Group, both established to review and provide strategic guidance on the development and the implementation of the surveys. The Government of CAR has been also closely implicated in the conceptualization and realization of these surveys as key ministries, such as the Ministry of Justice and Interior, are members of these two consultative bodies.

The first survey which was finalized in February 2020,²¹ was conducted in twelve prefectures and the city of Bangui. The findings demonstrate that progress in the judicial response to conflict-related sexual violence has positively impacted the populations' trust in the judicial system, through increased complaints registered for such crimes. The data collection for the two remaining surveys is ongoing. These surveys should provide national policymakers, Member States, UN actors, and civil society organizations supporting the fight against impunity for CRSV in CAR with objective information on the perceptions of the national populations on the links between security, justice and peace.

IV. Conclusion

In 2020, despite the significant challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic since March, many of the activities were carried out as part of the project of the Team of Experts to support strengthening the capacity of the national judicial authorities, including the UMIRR, to investigate and prosecute CRSV cases, as well as to reinforce cooperation between the various actors of the criminal chain. In this regard, the deployment of a Technical Specialist to MINUSCA has had a tremendous impact on the successful delivery of the project activities, especially through her capacity to provide daily mentoring support to the judicial police officers of the UMIRR, and the relevant judicial authorities, including the SCC. It has also allowed significant

²¹ HHI, *Peace Justice and Security Polls, Report – November 2020 (Data from February 2020)*, available at http://www.peacebuildingdata.org/sites/m/pdf/CAR_Poll5_ENG.pdf.

breakthrough with regards to accountability and building of national capacity in this respect. While progress has been made, much remains to be done and some activities have suffered from the delays caused by the pandemic.

Indeed, the strengthening of the criminal chain needs to be sustained to ensure the consolidation of the gains made, and to guarantee that persistent challenges are addressed. As demonstrated in the findings of the diagnostic report carried out by the Team of Experts, a number of actions should be prioritized by the national authorities to promote and strengthen a victim-centered justice response to CRSV. In this regard, in 2021, the Team of Experts will complete the following project activities as previously agreed: (i) training and mentoring police investigators and police officers serving in the UMIRR, the SCC, and the sexual violence desks of police stations; (ii) providing logistical and material support to the UMIRR to conduct more investigations; (iii) providing technical advice and support to the ordinary criminal courts and the SCC, regarding the prosecution of CRSV cases; (iv) developing the judicial authorities' capacity to track judicial proceedings involving CRSV; and (v) supporting legal information and legal aid.