

Conflict and Humanitarian Crisis in Platania

Conflict in Platania: An Overview

The Republic of Platania is a land-locked country of 900.000 km² with approx. 18 million inhabitants. Besides neighboring several smaller states, the longest border is shared with Cercania, the major regional power and a rival of Platania. The capital Bando is located in the North-East of the country. About 1/3 of Platania's surface is covered by arable land. The majority of this land is situated in the Middle Belt of Platania. Platania's population is made up of different communities: 50% of Platanians belong to the Sefa, 30% to the Katem and 20% to various smaller communities. The Sefa live in the North of the country, whereas the Katem's base is the South of the country. The Katem traditionally had less access to arable land than the Sefa and were politically marginalized. Caused by conflict over land between the Sefa and Katem communities, in particular the Middle Belt of Platania, a civil war started in 1982. For more than three decades, the Government of Platania, headed by Presiden Viden Abiso of the Partido Nueva Platania, and the Katem Liberation Front (KLF) struggling for an independent Katemia, have been fighting. After several years of more intense fighting in the early 1980s, the war has continued with lower intensity and was on the way of becoming the major 'forgotten crisis'. Up until 2016, 250.000 people had lost their lives and more than 2 million had been internally displaced. In the last two years, the situation has become more urgent, since an extreme drought has affected Platania's South since the beginning of 2014. A humanitarian catastrophe is evolving: 250.000 people are about to flee their homes and 100.000 suffer from famine. With the conflict ongoing, there is little hope to provide for those in need.

Background

War of Independence and First Government (1972-1978)

Platania was a colony of Belgium that controlled all aspects of the Platanian economy. Farming land was owned by the colonial power and Platanians had no ownership of the land which they cultivated. The majority of agricultural products had to be delivered to district administrators. In 1972, a war for independence ensued. One of the main armed groups, the Partido Nueva Platania (PNP) was democratically elected as the government of independent Platania in 1976. Land reforms were on top of the new government's agenda, as there were no clear regulations in place and the question of land tenure was a cause of local conflicts. Furthermore, land was seen as one of the few important sources of revenues in the country.

Land Reform by Partido Nueva Platania (1978-1982)

The government of PNP was headed by President Viden Abiso, a Sefa leader and a general. His political ideology has continued to be unclear ever since. Abiso put a Commission in charge of resolving disputes. However, this Commission itself soon proved to be a driver of conflict: The vast majority of its members were Sefa and its resolution of land disputes was perceived as biased, especially by the Katem community. Indeed, between 1978 and 1982 much of previously 'undeclared' land was given to ethnic Sefa. Furthermore, huge amounts of arable

land were sold to multinational agricultural companies. In order to close these deals, local farmers, once again the majority of them ethnic Katem, fell victim to expropriation by the government. Abiso is said to benefit from these deals personally – a claim that is easy to believe, considering that the country ranks 150 out of 168 states in the Transparency International ranking on corruption. Over the course of these years, the Katem lost precious agricultural land in those areas of the Middle Belt that they traditionally inhabited. As a consequence of the land reforms, the Katem were ‘pushed South’ into an area that increasingly suffered from land degradation due to excess usage and erosion.

1982 Revolt and Civil War (until 2014)

Having been marginalized in national politics by the PNP government and as a result of this increasing pressure on livelihoods, social protests by community members from all walks of life erupted in the country’s South. Local elders around whom the Katem community is organized played an influential role in these movements. When security forces violently broke down the peaceful demonstrations, it did not take long until an armed group, the Katem Liberation Front (KLF) became active in the South. Claiming an independent Katemia, the threat posed by the KLF had initially been underestimated both by the government as well as regional analysts.

Soon, it showed that they were extremely well equipped in terms of military materiel and able to recruit fighters from the local Katem communities in the South. Weapons were thought to have been delivered by Cercania, that had been trying to destabilize the government of Platania for a long time. This was the beginning of a civil war that had a firm grip on Platania ever since.

In military terms, neither side has been able to win: While the KLF was able to make advances to government-controlled areas in order to ‘win land for the Katem’, most of these attempts were defeated. At the same time, the government was not able to crack down the rebellion by military means due to the military force of the KLF either. The South of the country became a no-go area for government forces and has been firmly in the hand of the rebels since the end of the 1980s.

Besides the possible support from Cercania, the KLF’s armed struggle is financed, inter alia, by kidnapping, extortion and expropriation. In many instances, land managed by multinational corporations is violently taken by KLF. International staff of NGOs became a prime target for kidnappings early on and most of the international organizations decided to leave the country around 2005 when new KLF policies effectively closed off the humanitarian space. Since 2005, there is no reliable information on the KLF itself or its support basis among the local communities. By mid-2015 it looked like Platania had become one of the unresolved, yet ‘forgotten crises’. The government has ignored the pledges of the Katem community and leader Abiso, who remains in power, continues to sell land to multinational corporations.

2014 Drought

However, a severe drought has brought the conflict back onto the agenda in July 2016: For two years, the population of the South that had already been affected by the conflict, now faces a looming humanitarian disaster. Crop yield has decreased dramatically, land has been eroded and the majority of the population suffers from malnutrition. There are signs that this will cause large-scale environmentally-induced migration. The government of Platania

perceives IDPs from the South moving to the North as a threat to stability. The same holds true for neighbouring Cercania that, although rich in oil and gas, suffers from the drought, too and is not able to host refugees. With the little information available due to a lack of access of humanitarian NGOs, it is estimated that up to 250.000 people could begin to migrate in the near future and famine could cost the lives of 100.000. The military conflict hinders humanitarian assistance and conflict management seems to be a precondition for alleviating human suffering.

In July 2016, the situation in and around the capital seems to oscillate between old patterns and new developments and the arena of conflict resolution becomes a crowded playing field. Besides the warring parties – the government and the KLF – themselves, the Katem community as well as neighbouring state Cercania and Belgium with its special relations to Platania want to make their voices heard. In this complex situation, the agricultural company TENEX wants to close a deal with the government. Local NGOs such as ‘Citizen of Platania’ and international conflict resolution institutions, most importantly the International Crisis Mediation, offer their services for mediating an agreement. The international community, in particular UNHCR, has reset its focus on the crisis in Platania. Recently, there has been a pledge by the international community to provide EUR 54 million to alleviate the humanitarian suffering in Platania.

Task 1/

On the occasion of the visit of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, representatives of all parties informally meet in order to talk about the situation facing the country and the distribution of the 54 million EUR pledged. You have been sent to an advance visit to Plantania on behalf of the High Commissioner, and your role is to design a process plan and to present it in five minute presentation to the High Commissioner.

You will have 30 – 40 Minutes to discuss with your team of how you go about this.

These parties are in contact with the UNHCR representative:

Government of Platania

President Viden Abiso has publically blamed the KLF for the crisis, repeatedly rebuked their claim to independence and labelled them ‘nothing more than a criminal gang’. The government will not negotiate with the KLF in case they insist on their demand to independence. However, it sees the IDPs from the South as a threat to stability and fears to loose its influence and is of the opinion, that the money pledged by the international community should be spent on the victims of the conflict in the North. Having been in office for a very long time, Abiso is more interested in power and money than conflict resolution. It

is important to him to maintain good relations to the multinational corporations in the country.

Katem Liberation Front

Suffering from the drought themselves, the KLF has established back channels with advisors close to the president. Their community has been suffering immensely and their fighters are worn out after decades of conflict with no military victory in sight. There are different fractions within KLF: While some are motivated by the fight for the Katem's right to land, many groups have transformed into organized crime syndicates that have an interest in continuing the conflict. Those that remain committed to the political goals of the KLF are willing to trade independence for regional autonomy.

Katem Community

The Katem community is organized around local elders. These representatives are aware of the positions and the interests of the Katem community. Some of the elders condemn the actions of the KLF, because – contrary to popular belief – the broader community does not endorse the practices of the KLF. In fact, the local communities are threatened by violence, kidnappings and extortions, too. The Katem community is not interested in independence or strong regional autonomy per se. They want access to land and would settle for any fair solution that changes their current misery. Unfortunately, the government of Platania as well as the international community have thought of the Katem community and the KLF as one and the same.

Agricultural business TENEX

The corporation does not have a position on politics in Platania, but is interested in stability. Political stability in the country allows for free operation. TENEX has good working relations with President Abiso. Considering that a huge deal is about to be sealed, the company's main interest are guarantees that this agreement will go through. There have been allegations that the deal will lead to expropriation and displacement, but spokespeople of the company have refrained from commenting on these accusations.

Local NGO 'Citizens of Platania'

This NGO has an established network among local elders in the Katem community and knows the context very well. At the same time, many consortium members belong to the Sefa. In fact, it is one of the few initiatives that counts both Katem as well as Sefa as core group members. 'Citizens of Platania' has a proven your track record in brokering local deals and is convinced that they can be successful on a national level. At the same time, its resources and capacities are limited, as most of the members are volunteers. 'Citizens of Platania' call for humanitarian assistance, but are highly critical of the 'internationalization' of the conflict. They believe, Platanians themselves will find the best solutions and do not trust the expertise of international conflict resolution initiatives.

International Crisis Mediation (ICM)

ICM, based in Vienna, is a renowned mediation institution and has been active in the region for some time now and have an admirable track record of mediating ceasefire agreements in neighbouring states. They brokered an initial ceasefire in Cercania's civil war that lasted from 1975-1982 and still have a good network in place in Cercania. However, ICM has not been engaged in Platania, but sees the current situation as a good entry point. ICM has a dedicated and comparatively big team of mediators and analysts in the region. There is also a woman with whom CMI has been working with for a long time: Although she specialized in mediating agreements in South-East-Asia, she speaks Katem and regularly goes to Platania to visit relatives.

UNHCR

As a specialized agency, there is no doubt that UNHCR can deliver once it has access to the South of Platania. However, cooperation with the parties to the conflict has proven to be challenging for UNHCR. In 2005, UNHCR withdrew international staff from field offices in the South and gradually closed them down. UNHCR is willing to resume its work, but unless there is sufficient support by the government and KLF, UNHCR is not willing to risk the lives of its staff. Security guarantees are a precondition for UNHCR involvement. The vast majority of the EUR 54 Million pledged will be allocated to UNHCR.

Belgium

Belgium has strong bilateral ties to both Platania and Cercania. The Belgian government is willing to put more pressure on Cercania in order to stop it from delivering arms to the KLF. The EU is concerned about an increase of forced migration from Platania to the EU and is looking for means to prevent this. Belgium will hold the Presidency of the EU Council in a month. At the moment, the government of Platania is in the early stages of negotiating a free trade agreement with the EU. Belgium is willing to push the issue further on the EU agenda during its presidency. This also bears the opportunity to be very clear on the conditions that have to be met before negotiations can move forward swiftly.

Cercania

Cercania is a regional power that seeks to enhance its influence over neighbouring states. This is also the reason, why Cercania has supported the KLF. While Cercania was not interested in actually overthrowing Abiso's government, supporting the KLF was a way to destabilize the country and prevent it from becoming too powerful. Cercania is rich in oil and gas, but is suffering from the drought, too. Cercania's government has closed down its border with Platania in order to prevent refugees from Platania from entering on its territory. Restriction of migration movements to Cercania is the country's main interest.