

Truckers strike accusing Wagner of driver death in Central African Republic

AFP- Soaring prices have left a bitter taste in shoppers' mouths at a market in Bangui, as a strike by Cameroonian truckers accusing Russia's infamous Wagner mercenaries of a recent murder cuts off the Central African Republic (CAR).

Among the poorest countries in the world, landlocked CAR is heavily dependent on imports, more than 40 percent of which came from neighbouring Cameroon in 2022, according to the International Trade Centre.

But Cameroonian hauliers have refused to continue supplying the CAR after what they claim was the "assassination" of a driver by Russia's Wagner paramilitary group, active in the conflict-wracked country since 2018.

Taking place last week on the road to Bangui some 166 kilometres northeast of the capital, that shooting has left truckers fearing for their lives – and ordinary Centraficans paying the price at the till.

"In the space of 24 hours, certain goods like sugar and oil, which we often buy for breakfast have risen far too fast," Grace-a-Dieu Ndomoyando, 30, told AFP, before giving up on her shopping at Bangui's Boy-Rab market.

Justifying her prices, shopkeeper Magloire Guerematchi said that since the Cameroonian truckers went on strike, "it is difficult or even impossible to find food".

"If by chance we shopkeepers can find some it will be at a very exorbitant cost," the 27-year-old said – and the price rises are not just affecting food.

A bar of soap that would have cost 5,500 CFA francs (\$8.8) a few days ago can now fetch up to 6,350 CFA francs (\$10.2).

“To make a profit, we have to reduce quantities and increase prices because we too must be able to support our families,” he said.

– ‘Fear for their safety’ –

Bangui is linked to the sea via a long road to Cameroon’s key Atlantic port of Douala.

But since the shooting was announced, drivers have parked their trucks at the Cameroonian border town of Garoua-Boulai, around 725 kilometres west of Bangui, refusing to go any further.

“The trucks are loaded but they are stopped,” Hamadou Djika, speaking for the alliance of Cameroonian hauliers’ unions, told AFP over the phone.

“They will not continue the journey into the Central African Republic because they fear for their safety,” Djika added.

After filing a strike notice last Friday, the truckers are calling for an investigation into the shooting in Bogoin on the Bangui-Douala axis, along with an agreement from the Cameroonian and Centrafrican states to guarantee their protection.

Centrafrican driver Maxime Molako, who regularly makes the trip between Bangui and Garoua-Boulai, said he “sympathises” with his striking Cameroonian counterparts.

“It is essential to find a balance that ensures the safety of all and allows for the smooth flow of good,” the trucker told AFP on the phone from Garoua-Boulai.

On Wednesday, the CAR’s foreign minister said the Centrafrican authorities were planning to “continue discussions” with their

Cameroonian counterparts on the issue.

Speaking to the press, Sylvie Baipo-Temon assured an investigation was underway into the trucker's death – but declined to comment on whether Russian mercenaries were involved.

Back behind his shop's counter in Bangui, Guerematchi said the merchants "hope that this strike will not escalate".

"Otherwise there will be several products that we can no longer offer, such as rice and oil," the shopkeeper warned.

– Wagner at work –

The truckers' strike is far from the first to hit the instability-plagued CAR, which has suffered a series of civil wars and coups since its independence from France in 1960.

In 2015, Centrafrican and Cameroonian hauliers stopped working in protest against attacks by armed groups in the CAR, with the country also experiencing shortages and price rises in response.

In 2021, a blockade imposed by rebel groups left several hundred trucks blocked at the Cameroonian border by 50 days. Although that did not cause severe shortages in Bangui, the price of basic commodities soared.

These increases bite especially hard in a country where 71 percent of its more than six million people live below the poverty line, according to the World Bank.

The CAR has been locked in its latest civil war since a Muslim-dominated armed coalition ousted former president Francois Bozize in 2013.

French intervention and the deployment of UN peacekeepers paved the way for elections in 2016, won by President Faustin-Archange Touadera.

Two years later, with rebel groups threatening to destabilise the country again, Touadera brought in hundreds of Wagner mercenaries from Russia to help train his armed forces.

Wagner has since helped the CAR army push a rebel alliance led by Bozize away from the capital, forcing the fighters back into their strongholds.

But the West had criticised Russia's military involvement across Africa, with Wagner and its successor Africa Corps accused of human rights abuses.

The intensity of conflict has declined, but pockets of violence remain, with armed groups deploying small units to carry out raids on roads and mining sites.

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