

Since December 2013, the Central African Republic (CAR) has been experiencing a crisis leading to violent conflicts. The situation has had enormous consequences, including massive displacements of civilian populations from one province to another or from the CAR to a foreign country, thus fleeing hostilities, as well as other violations of human rights and international humanitarian law including large-scale killings/assassinations, cases of torture, sexual and gender-based violence, kidnappings, threats of attacks, burning of villages, etc.

Today the country is still in a situation of instability. Outside the capital city Bangui some areas are under the control of armed groups. This instability has led the CAR authorities to take drastic measures to fight impunity of the serious crimes committed on their territory.

With the support of the international community, they decided to create a Special Criminal Court (CPS in French) that has the competence to investigate and carry out trials of all serious crimes, violations of human rights, grave breaches of international criminal and humanitarian law committed on Central African soil since 1 January 2003.

The court was established by law in June 2015, it has a combination of international and domestic judges, prosecutors, and other staffs.

The SCC is under the general authority of the CAR Ministry of Justice and each organ of the court has a mix of international and national staff. International Judges, Prosecutors and the Registrar are seconded by their country, while the other specialists are recruited through the UNDP system.

The Support and protection unit for victims and witnesses (SPVW) is part of the registry under the overall leadership of the registrar and his deputy.

During the establishment of the SPVW unit, UNODC supported the MINUSCA and the UNDP. They provisioned different experts in witness protection, to improve the recruitment process of staffs, provided trainings, developing forms, standard operating procedures and provided external contracted experts.

Today, The SPVW unit is operational yet lacks some staff resources. The unit consists of 2 protection specialists, one support specialist and one confidential financial expert.

The goal is to regain population's confidence in the justice system, by showing as much professionalism as possible and respecting people approaching the court. By creating a clear definition and understanding of what the nature of the SPVW job is, the common ethics and guidelines of respecting, protecting and handling the different cases concerning victims and witnesses.

The below challenges are to be addressed:

- Confidentiality: is a crucial issue. To guarantee victims and witnesses protection, the identity of staff members handling their cases, including the nature of the job, should be kept highly confidential.
- Given the infrastructure, the armed groups, and the weather conditions in the country, it all imposes more challenges for reaching out to victims and witnesses, either way around. For example, it takes almost two weeks to get through a trip of 1000 kilometers.
- Getting victims or witnesses with protective measures on a plane, requires getting them identification documents which imposes another risk.
- Victims or witnesses have limited financial resources (estimate monthly income of \$50) which makes it nearly impossible for them to travel without any financial support.

- Victims and witnesses are living in their villages, where everyone knows what happened to the other during the incidents. Again, a situation that limits the liberty and the willingness of people to come forward to seek justice.
- Prepare a legacy unit where local staff members would be both recruited and trained on handling future reported cases, long after the international court will be dissolved.
- Address means to provide local fundings that will cover the cost of a witness protection program by the local authorities.