



Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) Situation in the Cameroon Anglophone Armed Conflict

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Executive Summary

The armed conflict in Cameroon's North-West and South-West regions (the two English speaking or Anglophone regions of the country) has resulted in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of persons. Besides over 30,000 who have fled beyond the country's borders into its Western neighbour Nigeria, over 430,000 persons have fled from their homes to safer places within the country, but mainly in cities in the francophone part of the country. Although the majority of people have sought sanctuary in dense forests far from their community and are removed from their natural habitations, most of them are living under precarious conditions and extreme hardships because they have been disconnected from their normal livelihood.

Since the conflict escalated in October, there has been no effective government action to alleviate their plight. Life is even worse for those in the forest, where basic health, hygiene and feeding needs are farfetched with high death rates among children, pregnant women and elder. A number of IDPs cross to Nigeria, because of the intensity of conflict, thus changing their status to refugees. To alleviate the plight of the IDPs requires, in the short term, that the government of Cameroon facilitate the access by humanitarian relief agencies, and in the long term, permit the IDPs to return their natural habitation as a comprehensive resolution of the conflict.

Key Points

- ❖ Under the intensity of the conflict, some of the displaced persons have been crossing into Cameroon's Western neighbour Nigeria. This spillover poses multiple risks for Nigeria a regional economic and political giant, with a possible risk of dissemination further into West Africa;
- ❖ IDPs are living under difficult conditions, (some of them under life-threatening conditions), disconnected from their livelihoods and unable to access basic nutritional, health and hygiene necessities; and
- ❖ The government of Cameroon must facilitate access to IDPs by humanitarian relief agencies and take steps to resolve the conflict and initiate the return of the IDPs to their homes and normalcy. The government has within the ministry of territorial administration, the Directorate for civil protection. Naturally, this directorate should have a plan or a roadmap for management and containment of natural disasters but from experience, the government reacts in a rather spontaneous manner towards natural disasters through presidential grants which are sometimes not effective. A glaring example would be the floods in Limbe, in 2001, or the recurrent floods in the Far North region.

Introduction

The separatist armed conflict that broke out in October 2016 in Cameroon's North-West and South-West regions (known as the English speaking or Anglophone regions of the country), has caused the displacement of segments of the population fleeing their homes to seek sanctuaries in nearby towns, villages, and in dense forests. According to the United Nations (UN) Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), over 430,000 people have been internally displaced, and in addition, over 30,000 have fled out of the national territory and are seeking refuge in neighbouring Nigeria.¹

The majority fleeing the conflict zones have sought sanctuary in other towns and villages within the national territory, while greater majorities have fled into dense forests far from their towns and villages. If this situation is not addressed, it may further aggravate the deteriorating situation of IDPs, with a growing number of persons fleeing their natural habitation.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), according to the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement², are "persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border."

The IDPs and refugee situation in the North-West and South-West regions of Cameroon, if not properly managed, may continue to escalate and thus affecting the peace and stability of its Western neighbour Nigeria, which will become a serious threat to international peace and security.

This policy brief will take a close look at the origin, factors and outcomes of the armed conflict that has resulted in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of persons in the English-speaking regions of Cameroon as a result of protests by Anglophones over claims of marginalization by the Francophone-dominated government. The policy brief will provide a number of recommendations for policy options which if taken into consideration will alleviate the plight of the IDPs and also prevent the possible risk of further migration of IDPs into the sub-region, which may serve as a threat to international peace and security.

Source of the Cameroon Anglophone conflict

The separatist armed conflict in the North-West and South-West regions of Cameroon was triggered by Anglophone protests against discrimination. It reflects the failure of a desperate attempt to forge a nation of peoples from different colonial backgrounds. Prior to independence and reunification, one part of the country was administered by France under the United Nations Trusteeship, the other under Britain. These two European powers inherited Cameroon from Germany, the original colonial master as a war trophy when they defeated Germany in the First World War. Both territories were once under German colonial rule following the Scramble for Africa which culminated in the partition of Africa at the conference of Berlin in 1884-85.³

While France administered its share of the country directly, Britain administered English speaking Cameroon as part of its Nigeria colony bordering the territory to the West, eventually called British Southern Cameroons. Agitations by British Southern Cameroons nationalists pushed for a separate identity for British Southern Cameroons, and the territory eventually obtained a quasi-autonomous status

as the fourth region of Nigeria besides the original Northern, Western and Eastern regions.

At independence, with opinion among Southern Cameroons political leaders divided over which way to go, the region of British Southern Cameroons was given the option in a plebiscite on 11th of February 1961 to choose between obtaining independence by remaining within Nigeria, or by re-joining French Cameroon. The majority of the population voted in favour of re-joining French Cameroon to form present-day Cameroon.

This plebiscite paved the way for the official reunification of British and French Cameroons on 1st October 1961 following terms to be agreed upon in a constitutional conference at Foumban in July 1961. During the Foumban conference, a federal system of government was adopted with the former British and French segment of the country having separate autonomous governments held together by a federal government in the capital Yaoundé. This guaranteed the protection of values and practices inherited from colonial administrations, especially political, judicial and educational.⁴

With the abolition of the federal system and the adoption of a unitary centralized system, following a disputed referendum on 20th May 1972, some members of the English speaking community began sensing a progressive eroding of their values and practices as they were increasingly overwhelmed by the majority Francophone population and the Francophone dominated government.

Anglophone activists consider the 1972 scrapping of the federation a major violation of the terms of the reunification of English and French Cameroon. Across the years, a number of actions by the Francophone majority have demonstrated what the Anglophones believe are part of a calculated effort to dominate, subjugate and assimilate.

The separatist armed conflict between Cameroon government defence and security forces and Ambazonia Defence Forces (ADF) evolved in October 2016 from demands by Anglophone teachers and Anglophone “Common Law” lawyers for reforms in their various sectors to reflect the bilingual and bicultural realities of Cameroon.

Initially, government officials and politicians dismissed the demands as baseless. Under increasing pressure, they undertook negotiations with the Anglophone protagonists which some observers considered were half-hearted. Faced with the government’s obvious hesitation to concede to their demands, the Anglophone teachers and lawyers concluded that the problem was the over-centralization of government which placed all decision-making in the hands of the central government in the capital Yaoundé ever since the federal system of government was replaced in 1972 with the unitary state. They, therefore, modified their demands to include a return to the federal system whereby as prior to 1972, the two Anglophone regions would be managed under the Anglo-Saxon system which would guarantee the protection of the Anglo-Saxon educational and judicial values and practices they set out to protect in their initial demands. The leaders of the Anglophone teachers and lawyers combined forces with other civil society actors to create the consortium of Anglophone Cameroon Civil Society Organisation, simply call ‘the Consortium’.

The government took offence at the demand for a return to the federal system of government and said it was an affront to state authority, referred to a speech by the head of state in which he said the form of state was non-negotiable and declared that the Consortium was illegal. Some of its leaders and some other frontline Anglophone leaders were arrested⁵. The arrest of these leaders amplified the crisis. Remnants of the Consortium leadership who escaped arrest fled abroad. In association with other

Anglophone activists in the diaspora, they remobilized, re-orientated the Anglophone struggle and modified the demands from a federation to outright secession from the Republic of Cameroon or “restoration of independence” of former British Southern Cameroon.

They pursued diplomatic channels including lobbying the United Nations and powerful Western governments referring to historical facts to justify their claim that former British Cameroon had been autonomous. In light of pursuing diplomatic avenues, Anglophone separatists’ leaders travelled to New York for the 2017 UN General Assembly where they hoped to benefit from the assembly of heads of state to press the case for the independence of Ambazonia⁶. To put pressure on President Paul Biya, the day he was addressing the General Assembly on 22 September 2017, Anglophone Cameroonians in Cameroon staged surprise massive street demonstrations across the English speaking part of Cameroon. The demonstrations like those of 1 October 2017, which they sort to mark as their independence day, were brutally suppressed by government defence and security forces.⁷

The alarming number of deaths by bullets was described as a massacre of Anglophones. Following the huge number killed, Anglophone activists began to advocate for what they called self-defence to protect unarmed civilians against disproportionate use of force by the government defence and security forces.⁸

Subsequently, armed groups claiming to belong to the ADF began carrying out guerrilla-type attacks on government targets, including government forces and officials. Scores of government troops and security officers have since been killed in ambush attacks and shootouts or gun battles. Soldiers and government officials or civilians or government supporters have also been kidnapped.⁹

Causes of displacements of persons

The massive displacements of persons in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon are caused by indiscriminate violence by the government’s defence and security forces as well as armed separatist groups. The following are some of the immediate reasons why persons have been forced out of their homes to seek safety elsewhere.

- Stray bullets during gun battles;
- Burning of houses and entire villages;
- Indiscriminate arrests;
- Abductions;
- Extrajudicial killings;
- Indiscriminate killings;
- Shutting down of schools, markets and hospitals;
- Restricted access to hospitals by government security and defence forces, because everyone with bullet wounds is considered a suspect; and
- Attacks on schools, students and teachers etc.¹⁰

Some of the atrocities are reportedly caused by the Ambazonia combatants (separatist fighters) against community members suspected to be collaborating with government defence and security forces.¹¹

Effects of displacement

The humanitarian crisis in the North-West and South-West regions of Cameroon is rapidly deteriorating. It should be noted that the IDPs situation in these regions, is one of the fastest growing displacement situations in Africa as compared to the Central Africa Republic, Burundi, South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo and the North East of Nigeria.¹²

People who have fled from the conflict zones are camping in the dense forests under precarious conditions just to seek the safety of the forest.

They live in the forest without adequate food, water, hygiene, medical care and proper shelter. They live under makeshift shacks (tents) without mosquito nets, exposed to dangerous reptiles and wild animals. Children, pregnant women, the aged are more exposed to these conditions. Pregnant women, without proper medical care, old people and patients have died in the forest as a result. So many persons have reportedly died after being bitten by snakes for lack of immediate medical attention.¹³ Furthermore, those who have sought sanctuaries in nearby towns and villages also lack adequate shelter, water, food, hygiene, medical care and basic services.

Many times IDPs have been reassured by the government that they could return home but sometimes when they returned they were confronted with further violence, and as a result have fled back to the forest.¹⁴

Under the intensity of the conflict, some of the displaced persons have been crossing into Cameroon's Western neighbour Nigeria, thus changing their status to refugees. This spillover poses multiple risks for Nigeria a regional economic and political giant, with a possible risk of further dissemination into West Africa. It should be noted that if serious measures are not taken, the spilling over of displaced persons from Cameroon into Nigeria, may aggravate with further migration beyond Nigeria into other countries of the sub-region and thus threaten international peace and security.

Policy recommendations

The government of Cameroon should allow full international humanitarian control of the IDP situation in the North-West and South-West regions of the country. In Cameroon, it is within the powers of the Minister of Territorial Administration (MINAT) to authorise humanitarian agencies to carry out their activities and MINAT has constantly been doing so. The MINAT issues an

authorisation for an agency to run and copies devolved authorities at the level of the regions, divisions and subdivisions (Governors, Senior Divisional Officers and Divisional Officers). What we push for is that the government creates an enabling environment for these humanitarian agencies to work in absolute neutrality in such a manner as to allow beneficiaries of their action not to have a negative perception. There have been cases where the government has opted to send the military to accompany (or escort) humanitarian actors to the field but the latter have persistently turned this down.

Another key recommendation is the need for the government to seek assistance from international and regional actors to address the humanitarian crisis, including most especially the IDP situation.

The humanitarian response to the IDP situation in these regions needs to be fully effective. To this effect, a national programme of reintegration through rehabilitation, reorientation and capacity-building of the IDPs should be put in place by the government. This will help to reintegrate the IDPs into their pre-conflict breadwinning activities. For example, for those who fled to the cities, obviously lacking the required skills for gainful employment in skilled jobs, life in the city could be a nightmare. It may not be conducive for the kind of breadwinning activities they were involved in back in their natural habitation. A fishing/farming Oroko individual from Kwakwa village along the Kumba -- Ekondo-Titi road (South-West region), displaced to the economic city Douala, where streams and farmlands are rare, would not be unable to engage in their natural activities for the livelihood of their family. A farming individual from Batibo (North-West region) may not find farmland in the capital, Yaoundé.

This initiative will be able to assess specific situations, identify specific needs, and provide reorientation (helping them find new

breadwinning activities) or rehabilitation (helping resume their original activities) where applicable, through training programs and providing capital for reintegration.

Addressing the plight of those who have sought sanctuary in the forest would be a challenge, but taking into consideration actions of other organizations, especially 'the Ayah Foundation' that have been trying to reach out to those in the forest, similar actions could be undertaken as applicable.

If there is a cessation of hostilities, which could open the way to the return of displaced persons, the focus would be on the rehabilitation of their original activities to help them reintegrate. If not, the option of reorientation would be carried at their various sanctuaries in the forest.

The final recommendation is that the government of Cameroon should seek a comprehensive resolution of the conflict through a complete and inclusive dialogue for a return to normalcy and the return of IDPs to their natural habitations.

Conclusion

The IDP situation can only be addressed when the government of Cameroon decides to take urgent action by addressing the Anglophone problem through a complete and inclusive dialogue with the Anglophone leaders. Releasing Anglophone political detainees will be a major step towards resolving the crisis. If less action is taken, the crisis will continue to escalate and make the IDP situation fast growing and will become worst in the nearest future, as most of the

IDPs may flee to neighbouring countries to seek refuge. This may have implications on the security situation of the sub-region and beyond. The IDP situation will continue to deteriorate if the government does not take serious measures to deescalate the crisis.

About the author

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Her current areas of research include 'Gender and Terrorism in the Lake Chad Basin: the case of the Far North Region of Cameroon'; and 'Human Rights in the Cameroon Anglophone Armed Conflict'. Some of her publications include 'The impact of terrorism on human rights; the case of the US' (2013); and 'Managing Corruption in Cameroon's Security Sector' (2002).

End Notes

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¹⁰ Ibid

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¹⁴ **Ibid**