

## **Cameroon's 'Anglophone Crisis'**

**A briefing note by the Global Campaign for Peace & Justice in Cameroon (December 2021)**

### **A summary of the current situation**

-The UN estimates 700,000 civilians (out of a population of six million Anglophones) are internally displaced by fighting and the destruction of homes and villages by government and separatist forces.

-For four years, over 855,000 children have been unable to attend school, and only 19% of schools were open even before the pandemic lockdown.

-UNOCHA believes that more than 65,000 Anglophones have fled to neighbouring Nigeria, with uncounted others seeking asylum in western countries and elsewhere.

-UNOCHA estimates that hundreds of Anglophone villages have been burned by Cameroonian armed forces. (Burning civilian villages as collective punishment violates International Humanitarian Law.)

-Impartial human rights NGOs have evidence implicating the Cameroon government's Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR), army, gendarmerie, and police, as well as non-state separatist fighters, in burning structures and "roasting" people, kidnapping, extorting, torturing, and killing unarmed civilians.

-Human rights watchdogs agree that more than 4,000 people have been killed since 2016.

-Amnesty International says that dozens of political opponents remain in prison, with journalists also behind bars. Cameroonian security forces regularly carry out arbitrary arrests.

### **The Anglophone Crisis is spinning out of control**

The security situation in Cameroon's Anglophone Regions continues to deteriorate, with unaccountable separatist splinter groups on the ground adding to the suffering of unarmed civilians, already under siege by Cameroonian armed forces.

The crisis began in 2016 with peaceful protests against the central government's imposition of French-speaking judges and teachers in English-speaking courts and schools, including a systematic erosion of Anglophone Common Law procedures. It deteriorated into a violent conflict and humanitarian disaster after the government used disproportionate force. There is overwhelming evidence from impartial human rights watchdogs such as Human Rights Watch, Crisis Group and Amnesty International, of war crimes and crimes against humanity perpetrated by all sides. The University of Toronto houses a database of verifiable atrocities.

A Swiss NGO, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, has tried to mediate, but distrust and

disinterest prevent progress. Bolstering of the Swiss process is needed, along with pressure from the international community. In October 2019, the Cameroon government responded to international advocacy by convening a Major National Dialogue. However, many Anglophone leaders excluded themselves due to fear, insufficient focus was allocated to the root of Anglophone grievances, and consequently, the crisis continued and got worse, despite the government's passage of a "Special Status" for the Anglophone regions, which in any case is cosmetic. The government has prevented the Catholic church from bringing together moderate civil-society Anglophone groups, exacerbating the presence of extremist views in the North West and South West regions. The government is already responding with DDR centres and a reconstruction programme which many perceive as futile in an active war zone.

## **Historical background**

Cameroon has had an "Anglophone Problem" since at least 1972, when constitutional changes eroded its federalist system, and probably since the British Southern Cameroons joined French Cameroun in 1961, due to marginalisation of the English-speakers by the largely French-speaking central government (the country's population is 20% Anglophone, 80% Francophone). From 1919 to 1960, there were two Cameroons. The larger territory was administered by France, using the French legal and education systems and language. In regions in the south, west and north, the British were in charge. At their schools, students spoke English and studied for O and A Levels, and in their courts, English Common Law was dispensed by English-speaking judges. In 1961, a referendum asked the inhabitants of British Cameroon if they wanted to join next-door Nigeria or French-speaking Cameroon. A third choice – independence – was not on offer. English-speaking Cameroonians in the north voted to join Nigeria, and in the south and west to join French Cameroon, which meant they were an immediate minority in the new Federal Republic of Cameroon. The constitution guaranteeing a federation of equal Francophone-Anglophone rights was soon dismantled in 1972 by the Francophone-majority government which consolidated its power. Until recently, only one of 36 cabinet members was Anglophone. It is fair to say that Anglophones have been marginalised politically, economically, and culturally by the Francophone-dominated government for many years.

## **War crimes & atrocities**

Armed separatists demand that the two Anglophone-dominated regions of Cameroon (North West and South West) become a new country called "Ambazonia." They are using increasingly sophisticated violent methods. Some of the so-called "Amba Boys" are outside the control of self-styled provisional "Ambazonian" leaders, who are not united.

Most recently, they have been implicated in IED explosions, kidnappings for ransom, executions, mutilations, and targeting of civilians. For instance, fighters allegedly:

- used an IED to kill a taxi driver who violated their stay-at-home Monday orders (Buea, November 10, 2021);
- threw an IED onto the roof of a university lecture hall, injuring 11 students, while Canada's High Commissioner was in a nearby lecture hall (Buea, November 10, 2021);

- kidnapped six divisional delegates of the Cameroon government, killing one (Ndian Division, June 15, 2021);
- shot dead a motorbike rider for violating their stay-at-home Monday orders (Bamenda, October 6, 2021);
- launched death threats against human rights defenders for preaching nonviolence at a conference in Toronto (November 2021);
- attacked schools, killing four students and one teacher (Ekondo Titi, November 24, 2021);
- mutilated and killed a primary school head teacher (Wum, October 5, 2021); and
- targeted and killed MSF- and UN-affiliated aid workers (South West Region, July 11, 2020, and Guzang-Batibo, August 7, 2020).

However, moderate Anglophone civil-society leaders continue to peacefully call for increased Anglophone autonomy to solve the crisis, such as going back to a version of Cameroon's original federalist system (officially in place from 1961-72), perhaps using a Quebec-Canada form of constitutional settlement.

Impartial human rights groups have documented grave abuses by Cameroon's defense and security forces, including burning homes and villages, indiscriminate shooting, targeting hospitals and schools, torturing, raping, extorting, and executing civilians. The government of Cameroon has arbitrarily detained thousands of English-speakers, including journalists.

Most recently, defense and security forces allegedly:

- invaded a hospital suspected of treating separatist fighters, threatening to set it ablaze (Kumbo, November 14, 2021);
- invaded the village of Waajung, razing over 20 houses, killing three civilians, and burning a man alive inside his shop (Wum, October 18, 2021);
- razed and looted homes in Tamba, reportedly raping a 15-year-old girl (October 5, 2021);
- burned homes in Kikaikom (October 7, 2021); and
- shot dead civilians in Tinto (October 2, 2021), Wum (October 19, 2021), Ngarbuh (October 27, 2021), Buea (November 14, 2021), Bamenda (November 15, 2021), Malende (November 18, 2021), Gom (November 27, 2021).

Additionally:

On October 14, 2021, a gendarme officer at a checkpoint in Buea opened fire on a civilian vehicle that did not want to pay him a bribe, killing a 5-year-old girl in the vehicle on her way to school. On November 12, 2021, a police officer at a checkpoint in Bamenda opened fire on a vehicle that did not want to comply with a routine check. Missing the vehicle, he killed a 7-year-old girl walking home from school. Both of these incidents prompted peaceful protests by the population, which the military met with live bullets in Bamenda, killing at least one protester and injuring several more.

## **The role of the international community**

The Cameroon government has largely avoided scrutiny due to its usefulness to the international community in fighting Nigeria's Islamist Boko Haram in its Far North. However, research suggests that Cameroon is now using weapons acquired to fight Boko Haram to commit atrocities far away in the Anglophone regions. Cameroon also hosts 350,000 refugees fleeing the violence in the Central African Republic and Nigeria.

The UN Security Council called for a global ceasefire due to COVID-19, and previously had called for inclusive talks to end the crisis: neither happened. The African Union, the Commonwealth, and La Francophonie have offered mild reprimands. The European Parliament passed a resolution in November 2021 about the human rights situation of the conflict, calling for action.

France is supportive of Cameroon and has units of its Foreign Legion stationed around the region. Whereas the British left Africa at independence, the French never did. They remain closely involved in the economic and military life of their former colonies. The UK government stands by the 1961 referendum often cited in Anglophone grievances.

The USA has cut military aid and removed Cameroon from trade benefits in response to human rights violations, and in June 2021 announced a policy of visa restrictions on individuals responsible for undermining peaceful resolution of the crisis.

It is vital for states and international bodies to move from expressing concern for Cameroon's crisis to taking coordinated action. The international community has been unsuccessful in encouraging a ceasefire and peace talks, so targeted smart sanctions on individual leaders until these things occur may break the logjam and open a path to peace, which would be a crucial and urgent lifeline for the civilians of English-speaking Cameroon and for this country that is rapidly losing its status as a beacon of stability in a troubled region.

## **A final note**

The Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) football tournament is set to take place in Cameroon in January-February 2022, after being twice postponed. The matches will be played against the backdrop of increasing insecurity due to the Anglophone conflict. There have been at least 64 improvised explosive device (IED) attacks in 2021. Some IED blasts have occurred outside the Anglophone regions in cities where AFCON football stadiums are located. Meanwhile, in the conflict zone, homes continue to be burned down, schoolchildren killed, civilians kidnapped, and both government forces and 'Amba Boys' are feared by the population. These are not ideal conditions under which to host a high-profile international sporting event.

The tournament is an opportunity for the Cameroon government to declare a temporary cessation of hostilities and to announce a road map of inclusive peace talks mediated by an impartial third party. A cloud of violence hangs over AFCON. Yet, this can be a moment for the warring parties to choose negotiation rather than continued conflict, with encouragement from the international community.