



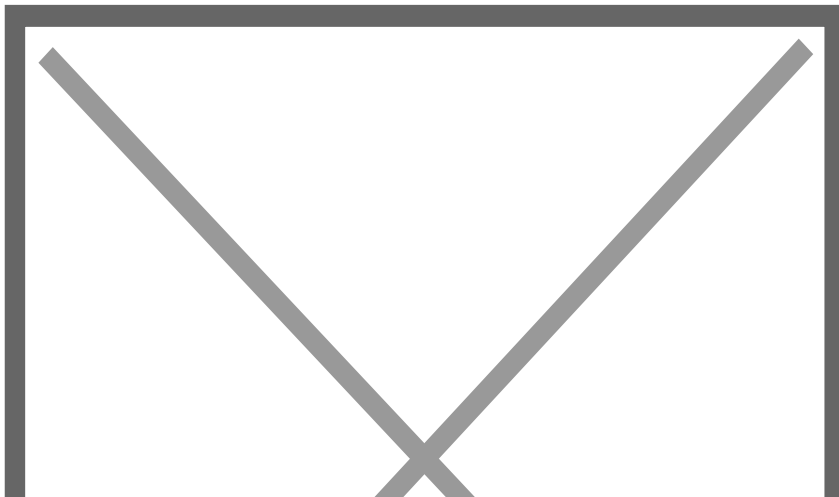
Cameroon's Unfolding Catastrophe: Contextualizing the Crisis

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Introduction

The Anglophone regions of Cameroon, home to most English-speaking Cameroonians, are experiencing what is now being recognized as one of the most serious and yet underreported human rights crises in the world.² While there have been disputes and conflicts in the Anglophone South West and North West regions of Cameroon for decades, a recent and sharp escalation of serious violence and crime has pushed the conflict to the brink of civil war.



Cameroon. Credit: Wikimedia Commons Public Domain: Source IPS

Since October 2016, there have been reports of deteriorating political, humanitarian, and security conditions. Extrajudicial killings, torture, arbitrary arrests, severe deprivations of liberty, and mass displacements of civilian populations have been reported by international, regional, and domestic actors, including the United Nations, the International Crisis Group (ICG), Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, among others. In Cameroon, media and human rights organizations have been reporting on the crisis extensively.

In response to the growing urgency and the need to draw attention to this human rights crisis, the Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa (CHRDA) and the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights (RWCHR) issued a joint report on the crisis on June 3, 2019. The full report, "[Cameroon's Unfolding Catastrophe: Evidence of Human Rights Violations and Crimes against Humanity in the Anglophone Regions of Cameroon](#)" (the Report). The Report is available on the websites of both organizations and served as the basis for a joint submission to the Canadian Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development on June 12, 2019 during its hearings on the human rights situation in Cameroon.

Significantly, the Report concludes not only that there have been serious human rights violations, but that reasonable grounds to believe that crimes against humanity have been committed in Cameroon. The analysis underscores the need for immediate action to prevent further atrocities, protect civilian populations, and seek accountability. The very silence surrounding the crisis is precisely what led the two Centres to work together in common cause to share this Report.

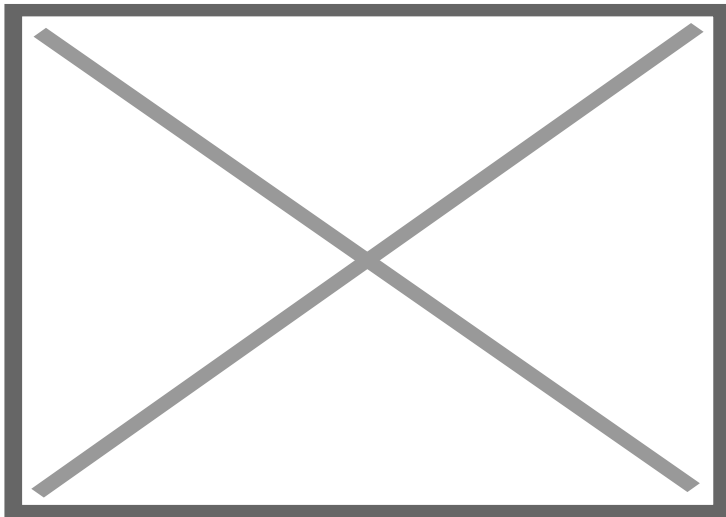
This is the first article in a series of three that will examine the current human rights crisis in Cameroon. It will set out the key facts related to the crisis and provide contextual information as to why it has attracted so little international attention to date. It will then provide a historical background to the conflict which stems from the colonial period and commitments made to the Anglophone minorities at the time of independence. This article will then examine domestic and international responses to the crisis to date.

A Human Rights and Humanitarian Crisis: Key Facts

Cameroon has rarely attracted in-depth human rights scrutiny outside its own borders, beyond the sustained attention of International Human Rights Organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Here are the reasons why we should be paying attention.

- According to a concept note circulated in advance of the Arria-Formula meeting of the UN Security Council in May 2019, there have been **mass displacements** of populations in the North West and South West regions of about **550,000 persons**.³ This represents more than 10 percent of the regions' population. As the info-graphic shows, the pace of attacks on villages and

burnings have been steadily increasing since 2017.



- Cameroon now has the **sixth largest displaced population in the world**.⁶ Many are fleeing violence as a result of raids on villages and surrounding areas. Men, women, and children have found refuge in forests where they lack hygiene, health services, sanitation, shelter, and food. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported in January 2019 that **1.3 million people** are in need of humanitarian assistance.⁷
- In 2019, CHRDA reported that military and security operations by the government had resulted in **206 villages attacked**, 134 of which have been completely or significantly damaged by state defence forces in efforts to crack down on armed groups seeking an Anglophone state of Ambazonia or local defence groups, in retaliation attacks, or against areas suspected of containing arms or harboring armed groups. These attacks are the single largest cause of the population displacements noted above.
- **Approximately 32,000 Cameroonians are refugees in Nigeria**.⁸ This figure includes only those who have been registered by the United Nations and does not include Cameroonians who have fled to the border areas in Nigeria to seek shelter but are staying with family and friends.
- At least **1,800 people have been killed since 2017**.⁹
- **Sexual violence and discrimination against women** have been widely reported. Women and girls are vulnerable to sexual assault.¹⁰ Rape, sexual exploitation, public humiliation, and torture have been reported to have been committed by security forces and non-state armed groups.¹¹
- There have been multiple reports of **severe deprivations of liberty, torture**, overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, arbitrary and **incommunicado detentions** and disappearances, and trials of civilians before military tribunals.

A crisis underneath the international radar screen

In the face of daily news of human rights outrages committed by major powers like China, threats from Russia, and horrific human rights violations committed by Middle Eastern countries like Saudi Arabia and Syria, it has not been easy to draw attention to the plight of a small West African country. Unlike

the Middle East and Venezuela, Cameroon lacks significant oil reserves. There is little in the way of obvious incentive for other countries to engage, despite growing evidence of violence and persecution of the Anglophone minority.

Cameroon's neighbours are not especially motivated to expose human rights violations and crimes taking place in the country. The African Commission for People's and Human Rights is one of the few international institutions in the region that has spoken out against the violence in the North West and South West regions.¹² However, its conclusions and critiques have not been accepted by the regime of President Paul Biya.

There are other contextual elements that help explain the relative lack of international action. The violent and criminal acts of armed local defence or separatist groups have terrorized local populations. As well, the government's conflict with Boko Haram in the Far North region of the country has resulted in a multinational joint task force (Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger) that is supported by more than 15 other countries including the United States and Canada. The task force has been working with the government to stabilize the region. Notably, however, the US has stated that further instability in the North West and South West jeopardizes the mutual security objectives of Cameroon and the Multinational Joint Task Force.¹³ As well, Cameroon is surrounded by several countries that are experiencing their own serious and ongoing serious issues, including the Central African Republic.

Paul Biya, the country's president, has held power for 36 years making him the elder statesman of the region. He enjoys considerable deference among his counterparts in other countries and has thus far managed to contain the international criticism.

Crucially, the silence has been encouraged by views that the current crisis is just one more conflict in a series of reciprocal attacks and reprisals between government and non-State forces, including separatist groups. However, minimizing the seriousness of the attacks on civilians as part of the "normal" conflict serves to shield serious human rights violations and crimes against humanity and may even enable their continuation. Minimizing the conflict also ignores evidence that the violence is spreading, engulfing Francophone regions of the country, becoming a threat to the entire sub-region.¹⁴

On October 24, 2018, following the re-election of President Biya, Global Affairs Canada released a statement calling on Cameroonian authorities and stakeholders to "engage in peaceful solutions to the crisis and [to] put an end to the violence raging in the North West and South West regions."¹⁵ Calls by the international community to address the human rights crisis through internal dialogue have proved largely ineffective to date.

Characterizing the Conflict

There is evidence that much of the violence is intentional and planned, including retaliation attacks on villages by government security forces, often followed by indiscriminate shooting into crowds of

civilians, invasions of private homes and murder of their inhabitants, and the rounding up and shooting of villagers. Violence against women has been widely reported.

Non-state actors, including local armed groups, also bear much responsibility for the violence. Separatist militias are battling government forces, while two organizations have been directing separatists from outside Cameroon to fight not only against Cameroonian security forces, but also against pro-government “self-defence” groups. Meanwhile, criminal gangs terrorize local inhabitants, wreaking havoc.

The crisis in the Anglophone regions is not simply an internal conflict. As the Report “Cameroon’s Unfolding Catastrophe: Evidence of Human Rights Violations and Crimes against Humanity in the Anglophone Regions of Cameroon” amply demonstrates, the military is conducting a deliberate, violent campaign against civilian populations. Moreover, the existence of internal conflict does not absolve or minimize Cameroon’s responsibilities under domestic and international law to respect, protect, and fulfill human rights, to fulfill its positive duties to protect civilians during security operations, and to ensure the human rights of those arrested and detained are protected.

Certain media outlets and social media have played a troubling role in Cameroon. On the one hand, social media has been used to expose the severity of the killings and abuse, using video materials to record events, often in real time. On the other hand, hate speech and incitement to violence and discrimination are propagated by government officials and radicalized [separatist] groups. Government officials refer to protesters in dehumanizing or incendiary terms, such as “dogs” and “terrorists.”¹⁶ Anglophones living in the Francophone regions sense resentment, if not hatred, from the Francophone population.¹⁷ Local armed defence groups and certain members of the diaspora have fanned the flames of intolerance and hatred, creating a real barrier to resolution of the conflict by moderates who are attempting to resolve the crisis.

To fully understand the current crisis and what needs to be done, the following section provides a short overview of the history of the conflict and its roots in European colonial practices.

Historical Background to the Crisis

Anglophone and Francophone Cameroon were united in 1961 with promises of power-sharing and rights for the Anglophone community. However, disputes have persisted about economic and political marginalization, disregard for the regions’ common law legal system, and the francization of education for Anglophones, who are a majority in the North West and South West regions of the country.

In October 2016, in Bamenda, long-standing grievances flared once again when lawyers from the North West and South West regions of Cameroon went on strike, protesting the elimination of English-language judges and procedures in Anglophone courts, as well as the erosion of the common law system more generally. A few weeks later, English-speaking teachers joined the protests with their own grievances. Several of the protests were led by the Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society

Consortium (CACSC) and the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC), civil society groups exercising their rights to expression and peaceful assembly.

However, what started as peaceful protest by lawyers and teachers degenerated into a regional conflict that has brought suffering and fear to millions and resulted in thousands of deaths.

On January 17, 2017, the government imposed a ban on the CACSC. About an hour after the ban, CACSC activists were arrested and the government imposed a four-month shutdown of the Internet in both the North West and South West regions.¹⁸ The Internet ban stayed in place until April 20, 2017. In September and October 2017, the government again attempted to restrict access to the Internet in the two regions, as a result of strikes on September 22 and October 1.¹⁹

Anglophone separatists symbolically proclaimed an independent state of “Ambazonia” on October 1, 2017, worsening the crisis and intensifying the military intervention in the regions.

In the months that followed, peaceful strikes by Anglophone lawyers and teachers in the streets and on university campuses were met by increasing violence by Cameroonian security forces, sparking riots and attacks by armed local defence and [secessionist] groups. Incidents of excessive force by security forces were reported, including firing live ammunition into crowds and residential streets, severe beatings of public protestors, dozens of arrests, extrajudicial killings, and reports of security forces breaking into the homes of suspected secessionists and their families.

The CHRDA has documented multiple instances of attacks on villages and civilians, resulting in murders, injuries, and mistreatment of civilians, and multiple instances of gender-based violence. The CHRDA has also been monitoring migration trends as a result of mass displacements of those who have lost their property and livelihoods and been forced to flee from security operations and attacks that have destroyed villages. Hundreds of thousands of civilians have hidden in the bush, moved to other areas, or sought refuge in neighbouring Nigeria. Entire villages have been burned down and emptied. Armed local groups, including secessionist groups, sometimes referred to as “Amba boys,” have become increasingly active as well, engaging in killings, attacks on property and schools, and kidnappings. Government buildings, vehicles, and police stations have been targeted in arson attacks by separatist groups.

“Ghost Town Operations,” an initiative of Anglophone civil society, called for boycotts of schools and businesses. The government retaliated by blocking Internet access in the two Anglophone regions, affecting more than four million inhabitants, with devastating impacts on civilians, businesses, and schoolchildren. Anglophone schools in rural areas have been shut down for two years or more. Internet blackouts have hindered communications and prevented reporting about the violence. Tens of thousands of children have lost a year or more of schooling. Teachers and school administrators have been harassed and killed.

Those arrested and detained are often held in deplorable conditions, for prolonged periods without charges or access to lawyers or family members. Detainees have been held incommunicado, and bail is often denied or not set at all. Trials of civilians have taken place before military tribunals. Anglophone detainees have been transferred to Francophone facilities, contrary to the view of the African Commission on People's and Human Rights that such transfers should not take place.²⁰

The violence escalated further in 2018.²¹ On December 13, 2018, US Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations noted a significant deterioration of the security and humanitarian conditions in the two Anglophone regions, observing that October 2018 (when presidential elections were held) was the most violent on record.²² In his end-of-year address to the Cameroonian nation on December 31, 2018, President Paul Biya declared that if his plea to “warmongers to lay down their weapons remains unheeded, the defence and security forces will be instructed to neutralize them.” This statement raises serious concerns about an intent to prolong the armed conflict, resulting in more suffering and death. The parties now appear deadlocked, with no dialogue between the government and separatists.²³

Domestic and international responses

The foundations of the crisis are political and institutional, but human rights violations and crimes against humanity are obstacles to the peace process. Drawing on the monitoring work of the CHRDA as a leading Cameroonian civil society actor, and the ongoing work of respected international organizations and NGOs cited in this report, we urge the international community to take a more active public stance and denounce the violence. The Cameroonian diaspora in Canada and around the world has been working for years to shine a spotlight on the violence, often with limited results.

International agencies and organizations have been turning their collective attention to preventing conflict and crisis escalation, rather than reacting to serious human rights violations and crimes against humanity after the fact. The evidence from Cameroon offers a compelling case study and an opportunity to translate clear early warning signs into early action to prevent further escalation. Whether framed as a “responsibility to protect,” the protection of populations, or a “responsibility to prevent,” the situation in Cameroon calls for action.²⁴

We support the calls of the African Commission, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the UN special advisor on prevention of genocide, Adama Dieng, for Cameroon to engage in meaningful dialogue and end the violence, and for impartial investigations into the violence.²⁵ More action is needed, including full investigations of the actions of law enforcement, security, and military personnel, to hold the perpetrators accountable for their crimes. Immediate reforms are required to end arbitrary arrests, and the practice of torture and incommunicado detention.²⁶ Hate speech and hate propaganda should be immediately taken off-line.

When considering solutions, it is also important to note the strong gendered component to the crisis: women have experienced sexual violence and discrimination, while men are generally chosen to lead

negotiations with teachers and lawyers. The voices of women have been routinely disregarded in the quest for peace, justice, and reconciliation.²⁷

They must be heard.

We also believe Canada has a more constructive role to play. In a statement issued at the time of the elections in Cameroon, Global Affairs Canada stated that:

Canada is a long-time friend of the Cameroonian people and seizes the opportunity to reiterate its commitment to support Cameroon in its future efforts to meet the challenges of peace and social and economic development. Canada remains ready to accompany Cameroon in its process for the return of peace.²⁸

We welcome the announcement in April 2019 of new development funding for Cameroon from Global Affairs Canada; but for peace to prevail, justice must be served. Reconciliation is a long-term process. Canada is uniquely placed to share its experience in peace building, rule of law, the longer project of building bilingual and bijural legal systems and instituting bilingual educational systems. Canada places a strong value on multiculturalism and has long-standing economic and international development ties with Cameroon, without a colonial history in the region. Canada has provided and continues to provide development assistance for governance, humanitarian assistance, health, and education, including support related to the crisis.²⁹

The Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights and the Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa call on the international community, including Canada, to take more concerted, public, and effective measures to denounce the violence, end the persecution of Anglophone communities, resolve the humanitarian crisis, and ensure that those responsible for atrocities are punished in accordance with the law.

Part II of this series will examine in detail the human rights violations that have been committed by the government of Cameroon and its impact on the Anglophone regions.

Part III will set out the evidence for crimes against humanity.

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The article draws extensively on previously published material, notably, Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa and Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights, “Cameroon’s Unfolding Catastrophe: Evidence of Human Rights Violations and Crimes against Humanity in the Anglophone Regions of Cameroon” (June 3, 2019). Also available online at <https://www.chrda.org/2019/06/04/18371/>.

1. See, e.g., Robert Malley, “10 Conflicts to Watch in 2019” (International Crisis Group: December 29, 2018). International Crisis Group, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/10-conflicts-watch-2019> [ICG Malley 2018]; See also, Jan Egeland, Secretary General of The Norwegian Refugee Council “Statement to the Security Council Arria-Formula meeting on his visit to assess the humanitarian situation in Cameroon, and recommendations on the way forward” (May 14, 2019); Pearl Eliadis, “Crimes against humanity have been committed in Cameroon. Let’s not turn away” in *Five Human Rights Issues that Need Urgent Attention* OpenCanada.org (June 2019).

2. The concept note circulated ahead of the Arria-Formula meeting at the UN Security Council in May 2019 reports 560,000 displaced persons. See Relief Web Press Release ? <https://reliefweb.int/report/cameroon/arria-formula-meeting-humanitarian-situation-cameroon?>> . UN OCHA reported approximately 450,000 in January 2019.

3. Felix Nkongho is the founder and chair of the Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa. He is a well-known barrister and human rights activist. The Centre is based in Buea, Cameroon.

4. Pearl Eliadis is a human rights lawyer based in Montréal and serves as a senior fellow at the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights.

5. Relief Web, Press Release <https://reliefweb.int/report/cameroon/arria-formula-meeting-humanitarian-situation-cameroon> . (May 13, 2019) [Relief Web 2019].

6. UN OCHA, Cameroon: North-West and South-West Crisis Situation Report No. 3 – As of 31 January 2019. Online < <https://reliefweb.int/report/cameroon/cameroon-north-west-and-south-west-crisis-situation-report-no-3-31-january-2019>>

7. UN figures as at January 9, 2019 were 32,751; UNHCR Operational Portal: Nigeria. Online: < <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/country/nga>>.

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17. *Ibid.*
18. Human Rights Council, Universal Periodic Review: Cameroon. UN Docs A/HRC/WG.6/30/CMR/1 (May 3, 2018), Human Rights Council, para 30.
19. *Ibid.*
- Kevin Mgwanga Gunme & Members of the SCNC and SCAPO (for themselves and on behalf of the People of the Southern Cameroon) v La Republique du Cameroun*, Hearing on the Merits, 2009 African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights, Comm. No. 266/2003, ACPHR, 26 Ann. Activity Rep. (2008–09) [*Kevin Mgwanga Gunme*].
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22. “Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on the Central African Region” (New York City, December 13, 2018) [Cohen 2018].
23. ICG Africa Report N^o 272, *supra* note 13.
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