



Paper Title:

Sexual-based Violence (SBV) and human rights abuses in Ambazonia conflict in Cameroon

Author's Name:

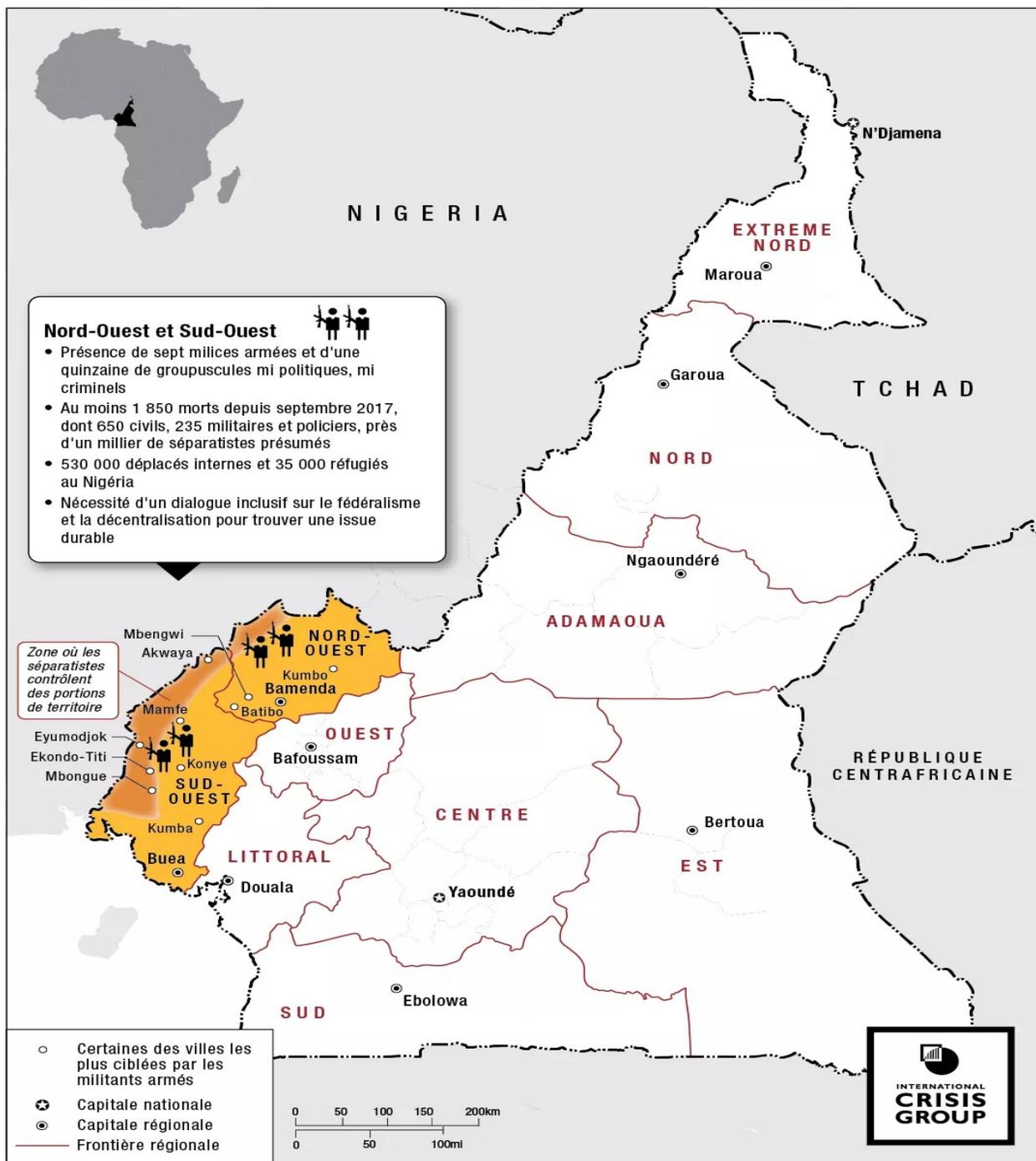
Egbe Ndip Eyong

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Source: International Crisis Group, 31 March 2023, p. 22

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Abstract:

The endless armed conflict in southern Cameroon between government armed forces and separatists rebels also known as the Anglophone crisis began in late 2016, when English-speaking teachers and lawyers organized protests due to professional and political marginalization by the majority French-speaking government of Cameroon over the minority English speaking population. Following a heavy handed crackdown on the mainly peaceful protests, armed rebel groups mobilized and vowed to fight for the independence of the Anglophone areas, which they call Ambazonia. In the resulting clashes with the Cameroonian security forces and military, “Human Rights Watch estimates more than 4,000 civilians died and more than 700,000 were displaced as of 2022”(HRW). Nobody seems to be taking the conflict situation seriously, considering the scale of human rights abuse violations committed and the innocent people dying, not seriously enough as the international community continues ignore the atrocities committed by both government forces and separatists rebels.

This paper intends to offer a comprehensive analysis and expose abuses in the ongoing conflict in the anglophone region of Cameroon. An overview of the conflict will precede an analysis of publicly available information on human rights violations and impact on women and children so as to paint a clearer picture of the ongoing conflict to date. The secondary data will come from credible witnesses and international organizations like United Nations, human rights groups based in Cameroon and abroad.

The ongoing conflict has subjected many women and girls to rape and frequent sexual assault and other forms of sexual violence perpetrated by both armed separatists and government armed forces. Sexual abuse acts are often used as weapons of war, with both forces targeting women to humiliate, control, punish and destabilize them, their relationships and communities.

There is also ample evidence that factions of the Cameroonian State forces and the separatist groups have committed and continue to commit human rights abuses. Organizations, such as Human Rights Watch (HRW), Amnesty International and BBC News Africa have all independently reported that security forces have engaged in mass arson and property damages.

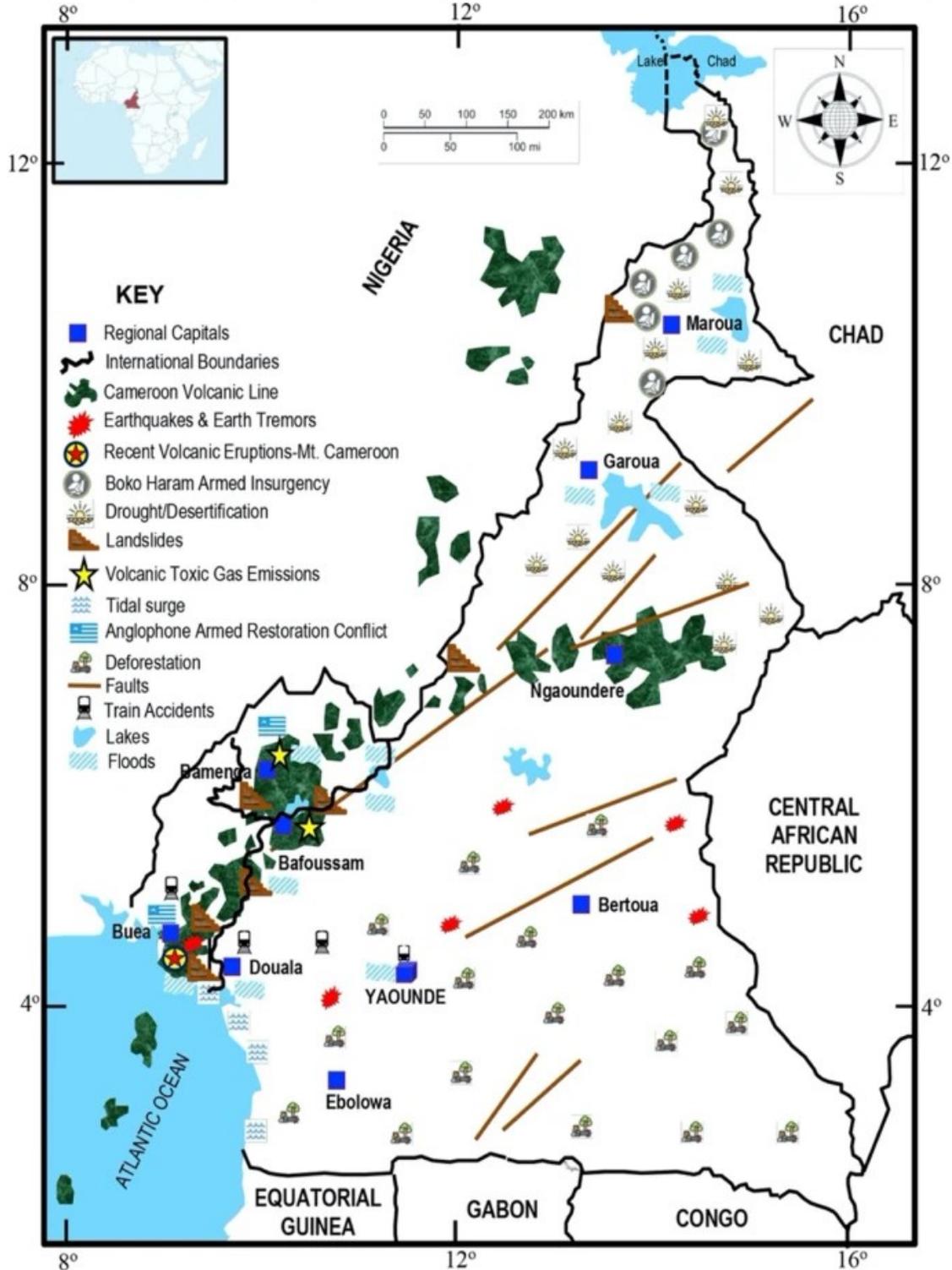
Index Terms — *Anglophone, Sexual-based Violence (SBV), Ambas (Ambazonian), Repression, Southern Cameroon, International Labor Organization (ILO), UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), Journal of International women Studies (JIWS), Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)*

Introduction

The unthinkable experience of giving birth in the bushes, no possibility of going to school, forced prostitution, and a constant struggle to take care of their families, women in conflict ravaged Anglophone regions of Cameroon are suffering as the crisis continues without any end in sight. The continuous killings in Anglophone Cameroon regions (North west and South west regions), which began in early 2016, has had a devastating impact on many communities, and women are facing some of the most severe challenges to date. This civil war which is mainly between the English-speaking regions and the Cameroon government forces has resulted in severe violence, displacement, and serious social and economic disruptions in the lives of mainly innocent civilians. Women, in particular experience a number of distinct challenges during and most likely after the conflict.

The french central government crackdown on peaceful protests by Anglophone teachers and lawyers rallying against alleged discrimination and suppression of the English language in courts and schools incited an armed separatist movement and self-declaration of independence for an independent state of Ambazonia. The most affected conflict areas are rural communities (villages and small towns), as people scramble to flee both sides, not knowing if/when a direct or stray bullet will kill them or a love one. As I write, the different armed groups from around the villages continue fight against the Cameroon military and both forces have been accused of gross human rights abuses of civilians, especially women and children. The escalation of the conflict without any solution in sight will only go on to add more suffering and tragedy to the already limited human rights vulnerability of women in the region.

Cameroon map showing the Anglophone regions including the main natural hazards in the country. Source: Bang (2021)



The aftermath of the Southern Cameroon crisis and the looming complex emergencies

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1). Based Sexual Violence

- **Frequent Sexual Assault and Rape:**

The ongoing conflict has subjected many women and girls to rape and frequent sexual assault and other forms of sexual violence perpetrated by both armed separatists and government armed forces. Sexual abuse acts are often used as weapons of war, with both forces targeting women to humiliate, control, punish and destabilize them, their relationships and communities. Desperate and barely surviving women often become prey to the men with guns and have little or no choice but to comply or die trying to preserve themselves. There has been increase in sex exploitation since the start of the conflict and in some instances, women and girls are forced into sexual relationships with fighters, and many face exploitation in refugee camps or internally displaced persons (IDP) settlements.

- **Giving birth in the bush:**

Since the conflict ongoing, there has been a spike in the number of sexual violent cases, gunshot injuries, rape and increase in the number of childbirth in the bushes as a result of limited access to medical centers or the total absence thereof. Countless stories about pregnant women losing their lives and children in childbirth have become commonplace because of the distances they have to cover in search of healthcare often without success. “Access to and availability of basic social services, including sexual and reproductive health care and education, are severely limited in conflict-affected regions and many pregnant women do not have access to adequate maternal healthcare. Reports of gender-based violence have significantly increased since the start of the crisis” (UNFPA, 09.12.2024). Since 2018 UNFPA has carried out bush kit distribution and each bush kit contains some essential items for pregnant women who might give birth in the bushes, items like clean plastic sheet to give birth on, scissors, gloves, as well as diapers for the newborn kids. Once a peaceful region though with limited healthcare facilities, women could still get enough help but the conflict has plunged them into a state of feeling useless and helpless in the bushes.

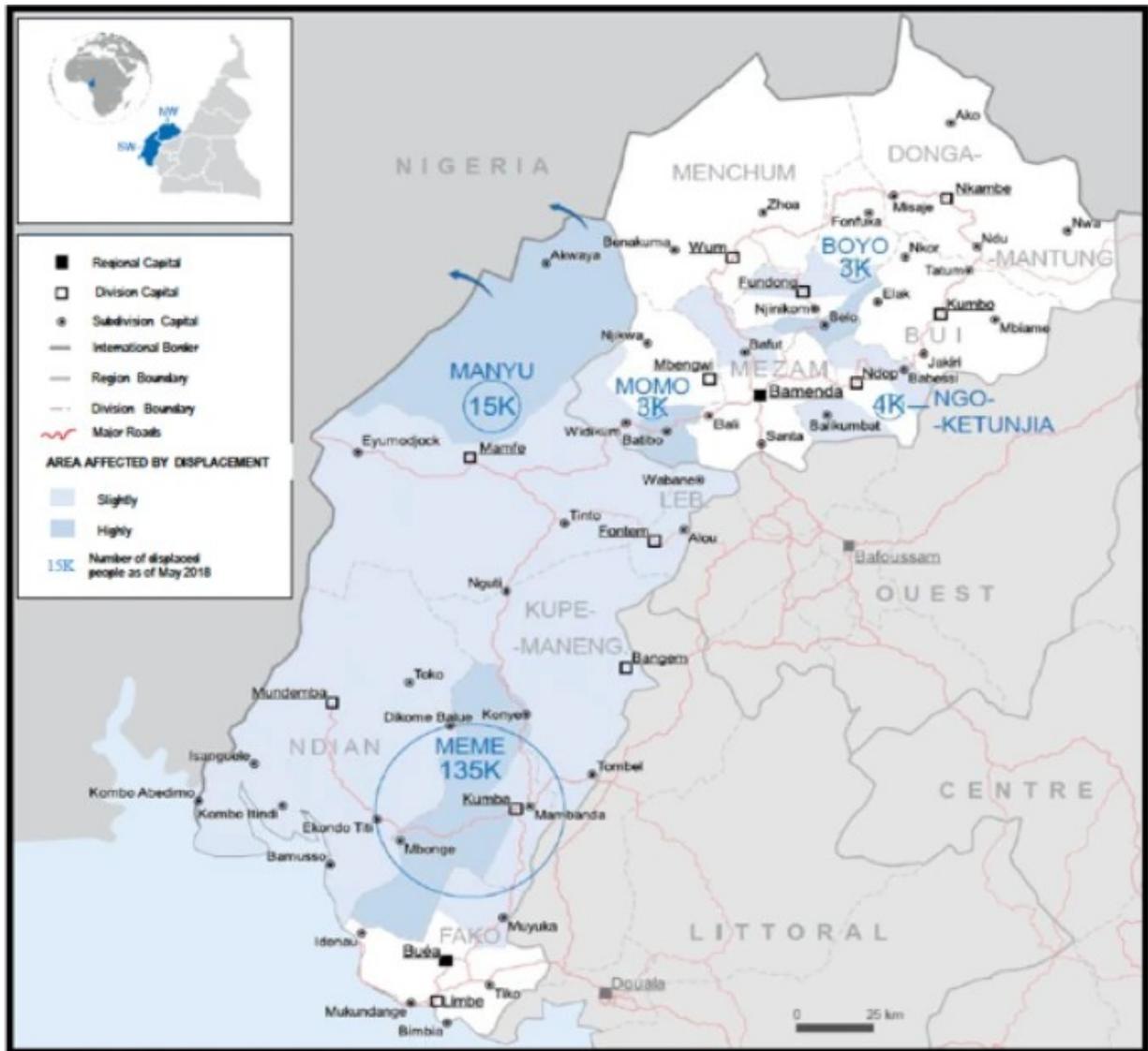
2). Forced Refugee Status and Internal Displacement

- i. **Internal Displacement:**

The main victim of this continued conflict is the family unit, most families have either had a loved killed, hurt or injured in the conflict or out of touch with them during the confusion caused by fighting between separatists rebels and government soldiers.

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Millions of southern Cameroonians, including women and children, have been displaced from their homes due to the conflicts. Women are often left with the burden of responsibility of caring for children, the elderly, and other vulnerable members of the family, while struggling to find shelter and access basic necessities.



Anglophone Regions showing areas most affected by population displacement. Source: adapted from UNOCHA (2018)

ii. Refugee Status:

Thousands of southern Cameroonian women have fled their homes and villages into cities and towns in South-South of Nigeria for safety. The conflict has forced them live as refugees in these areas and they face serious hardships issues rendering them vulnerable to exploitation, trafficking, and abuse

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especially sexual abuse. The poorly managed refugee camps means women often struggle with lack of privacy, poor healthcare and sanitation facilities. Matilda (not her real name) 21 years old says that her husband ran to Nigeria after he saw their village near Mamfe town burnt down and many people killed. Now she is experiencing tough times in the village but not thinking to run to Nigeria because the husband has never made any contact and she not sure if he is dead or alive. Meanwhile, Joanna 25 has two kids and in communication with her husband but not contemplating to join him because of the filthy conditions in the camps according to her partner.

3). Income loss and Economic Subjugation

- **Source of income destroyed:** The conflict has caused many women especially those in rural areas who relied on small businesses, trade and farming as their only source of income to stop. The disruption on these activities through the continues destruction of markets, road blocks and abandoned farmland due to the fighting has further exacerbated their economic insecurity leaving the women more vulnerable. The families who have moved to nearby towns now struggle to pay rents something they never did leaving in their own homes in the villages. Priscilla, 31 left the village after leaving in the bush for six months when their house was burnt down and the children not going to school and moved to Buea with her family of four including her husband looks pale and frustrated as she explains jobs are scarce in Buea but has managed to find a place in the street to sell puff-puff so she pay her children's fees while her husband is still jobless.
- **Poverty and suffering:** The ongoing displacement and serious destruction of many businesses have plunged many women into deep poverty, making it harder for them to support their families or access basic needs such as food, healthcare, and education. One eyewitness Martina says “once the military arrived the shooting began and the Ambazonia forces were shooting all over the place,” she was all scarred on her back from the metal fence that cut her as she fled. After four days roaming the bush, she managed receive mobile money and together with the other workers struggled and got to Buea. Many women say neither the armed military nor the separatists rebels respect women and children. Women and children have been shot, killed, set on fire in the anglophone region by both sides.

4). Little or no Access to Healthcare and Education

- **Limited access to Education:**

Most schools in the Anglophone regions have been closed or attacked, leading to the loss of continued education for children, especially girls. This affects the already limited prospects for women's future, as they are often the first line in care and educators of children in their families. The majority of women with children left the village to escape the gunfire, but they also want to be able give their children an education. The separatists rebels have prevented children from going to school as part of their action against the government, due in part because of the influx of Francophone teachers in to Anglophone classrooms in the anglophone regions.

- **Healthcare Access:**

The anglophone conflict has also led to the destruction of many healthcare facilities in the region making it very difficult for women to access maternal healthcare, family planning, and treatment for easily transmitted diseases. Women also face higher risks during childbirth due to the breakdown of medical infrastructure and the lack of skilled personnel because many have ran away..

5). Emotional and Psychological Trauma

- **Mental Health Issues:**

Women are often the primary caretakers in the families, and the stress and pain of losing loved ones becomes unbearable some times, witnessing violence, or being subjected to violence themselves can result in mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD. However, mental health services are scarce or non existent in many of the conflict regions.

- **Loss of Family Members:**

Moreover, women who lose their loved ones, husbands, children, or other family members to the conflict are often left to take on additional caretakers responsibilities, which adds to their emotional and psychological stress.

6). Gender-based Inequality

- **Excluded from Peace building Processes:**

In spite of the devastating impact of the conflict on women, they are often excluded from peace building and decision making processes. The history of cultural and societal norms in Cameroon have often limited women's participation in leadership, which means their voices are marginalized in many decision making circles and worst in conflict resolution situations.

- **Dominant Gender Roles:**

The culturally ingrained male dominant system in Cameroon means that women face additional societal pressure, they are always ignored and the roles expected of them often prevent them from speaking out or asserting their rights, particularly in conflict settings.

7). Trafficking and/or exploitation

- **Trafficking for Exploitation:**

The anglophone conflict has left women and children displaced and vulnerable to human traffickers, who exploit the chaos to engage in sex trafficking, forced labor, and other forms of exploitation.

8). Increased Childcare Burden

- **Caretaker Responsibilities:**

With many men either killed or absent due to the conflict, women are left with the increased responsibility of taking care of children, which often means dealing with both their emotional trauma and ensuring their survival in a war-torn environment. This often leads to long-term impacts on both the women and the children's mental and physical health.

Atrocities continue from both sides

The Human Rights Watch field research estimates that at least 6.000 civilians have been killed by both government force and armed separatists rebels since 2016 in the anglophone region of Cameroon.

Human Rights Abuses by Government Forces

Government security and military forces responded to the separatists independence fighters attacks with heavy military response against the rebels often targeting mostly civilians in the

anglophone regions. On 10th January 2017, armed military killed nine civilians including a woman and child in Mautu village in south west region and looted many of homes and threatened the residents.

On April 24, in Ndop, North-West region, soldiers from the Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR) stopped and seriously beat and detained about 40 motorbike riders part of a funeral convoy because they suspected the bikers of being separatist fighters. More than 17 of those detained are presumed disappeared if not dead and their whereabouts remained unknown till date.

On June 1, soldiers from the 53rd Motorized Infantry Battalion killed nine people including four women and an 18-month-old girl, in Missong village, North-West region, in a reprisal operation against a community suspected of harboring separatist fighters.

On June 8, soldiers conducted a military operation in Chomba village North-West region, burning a home and looting the local health center. They also arrested a woman along with her 11-year-old foster child and held them for 24 days at the BIR barracks in Bafut, North-West region.

Gom village North West region 8th June, two soldiers break into the house the fon (village chief) beat eight people including a 72 years old. They also shot and killed Nwang Lydia, a 60 year old woman because she failed to provide information about rebel fighters.

Around June 11 in Belo, North-West region, security forces killed one man injured another, burned at least 12 homes, destroyed a community health center, and looted at least 10 shops.

June 9th 2017 military soldiers killed a 58 years old man and raped a 53 years old woman during a security operation in Mbuluf village, north west region breaking into and looting 33 shops and homes including the house of the fon in Ndzeen village.

On October 14, a gendarme shot and killed Caroluise Enondiale, a 4-year-old girl, on her way to school in Buea, South-West region. An angry mob responded by lynching the gendarme.

On November 10, an improvised explosive device was thrown on to the roof of a lecture hall at the University of Buea, South-West region wounding at least 11 students. At time of writing no one had claimed responsibility for the attack, but authorities blamed separatist fighters.

Abuses and violence committed by Armed Separatists

Separatist rebels continue to kill, torture, assault, and kidnap civilians. They also continued their attacks against pupils, teachers, and education, depriving thousands of students of the right to

education. According to the United Nations 700,000 students were out of school in March 2021 as a result of the crisis.

On January 9, suspected separatist fighters killed the principal of a high school in Eyumojock, South-West region and wounded a principal from another high school in Tinto, South-West region. On January 12, separatist fighters shot and injured a female public-school teacher in Bamenda, North-West region

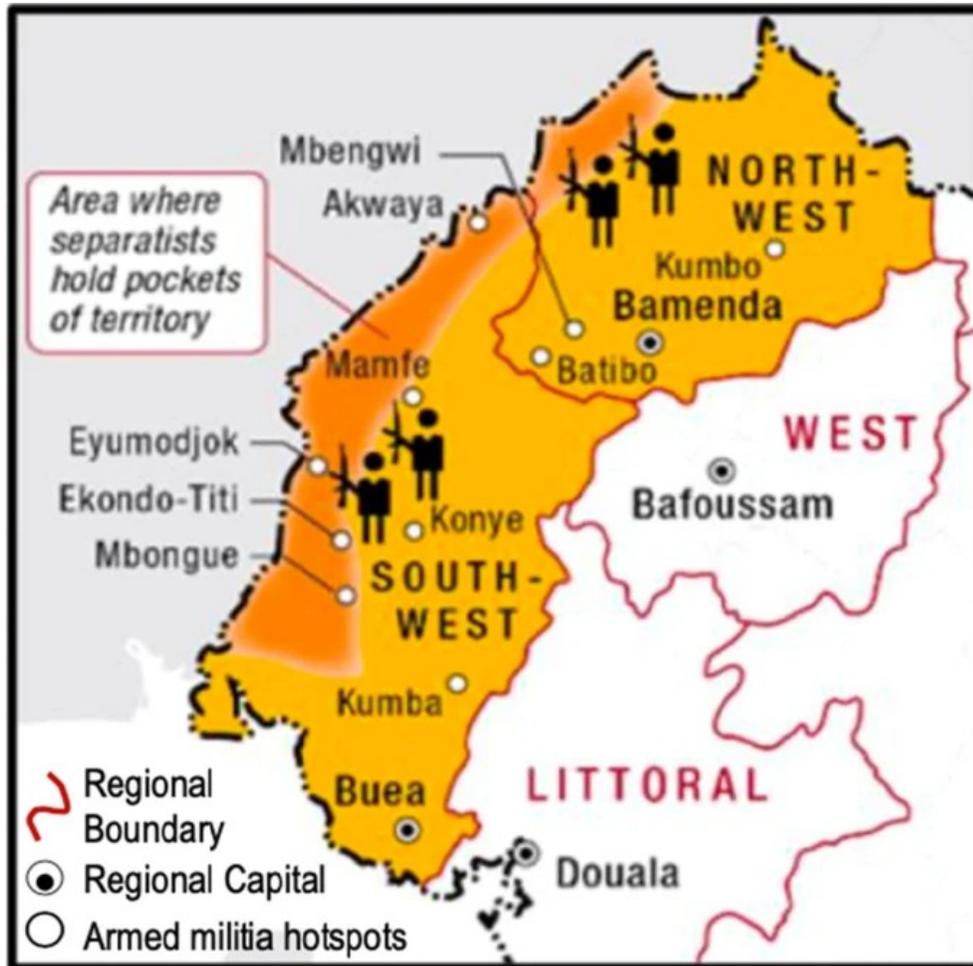
On January 19, separatist fighters attacked the government high school in Weh, North-West region, abducting five teachers, and injuring two students for not complying with a school boycott and for not contributing financially to their struggle for independence. The teachers were released on January 24 following a ransom payment.

February 26, separatist fighters stopped two vehicles from the Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Services (CBCHS), a nonprofit medical organization, at a checkpoint in Mile 90, North-West region. They fired at one vehicle, killing a 46-year-old nurse, and injuring another nurse and a doctor

On June 12, separatist fighters physically assaulted, threatened and humiliated a group of 11 students, aged from 14 to 18, walking to the Bokova high school, in Buea, South-West region. They shot one of the students in the right leg and seized or destroyed the students' school material.

Separatist rebels killed three tribal chiefs in Essoh Attah village, South West region on 13 February while on the 27th of February armed separatist rebels kidnapped a medical doctor in Bali, in the North West region and threatened to kill him before eventually releasing him the same day after receiving a ransom payment.

On June 6th, separatist fighters attacked a religious gathering in Mamfe, South West region killing a 12-year-old boy and wounding another 16-year-old boy. Separatist rebels killed Fuh Max Dang, a physics teacher at government Bilingual High School in Kumba, South West region, on 1st July. On August 29, armed separatists kidnapped Julius Agbortoko, a Catholic priest of the Mamfe diocese in the South West region and asked for 20 million FCFA ransom for his release.



Anglophone region showing pockets of territory allegedly controlled by the separatists. Source: adapted from the ICG (2019)

Government Crackdown on Dissent and Opposition

The government continues to limit the ability of the civilians, political opposition and civil society to function freely. In April 2020, Doctors Without Borders suspended all its activities in the South West region following what they believe was the unjust detention of four of their staff members. In December 2020, the Cameroon authorities suspended MSF (Médecins Sans Frontières) activities in the North-West region accusing the international organization of being too close to the anglophone separatists, leaving thousands of people in the region without access to healthcare services.

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On August 11, the military arrested Abdul Karim Ali, a prominent Cameroonian Anglophone peace activist, in Bamenda, North-West region. While there are no official charges against Karim Ali, he was told he is accused of apology for terrorism and for possessing a video on his phone showing alleged human rights abuses committed by a Cameroonian soldier against civilians in the country's Anglophone regions. As of September, Karim Ali remained in detention awaiting trial.

Conclusion

The continuous crisis in Anglophone Cameroon regions of (North west and South west regions), which began in early 2016, continue to have devastating impact on many communities, and women are facing some of the most severe challenges to date. This civil war which is mainly between the English-speaking regions separatists rebels and the Cameroon government forces has resulted in severe violence, displacement, and serious social and economic disruptions in the lives of mainly innocent civilians.

The Anglophone conflict has caused immense strain on women, worsening preexisting gender-based inequalities and creating new and tougher challenges. While women have shown remarkable resilience and have been active in advocating for peace, their suffering continues to be a major humanitarian issue. Addressing their needs and ensuring their active participation in peace processes will be key to finding a sustainable solution to the conflict.

The Human Rights violations continue to worsen with the passage of time. Human Rights Watch field research estimates that at least 6.000 civilians have been killed by both government force and armed separatists rebels since 2016 in the anglophone region of Cameroon. The most affected conflict areas are rural communities (villages and small towns), as people scramble to flee both sides, not knowing if/when a direct or stray bullet will kill them or a love one.

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