

Lawyers' Rights Watch Canada

NGO in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations

www.lrwc.org; lrwc@portal.ca; Tel: +1 604 738 0338; Fax: +1 604 736 1175

3220 West 13th Avenue, Vancouver, B.C. CANADA V6K 2V5

Cameroon: Anglophones face severe humanitarian crisis

Briefing Note

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The United Nations (UN) High Commissioner of Human Rights warned in March, “long-standing structural discrimination in the Anglophone region of the [Cameroon] has led to continuing clashes between security forces and separatist groups.”¹ Since then the Government of Cameroon (Cameroon) has failed to take steps to reduce violence confrontation, address historic inequality and discrimination for Anglophones; respect and ensure the rights of people promoting equal rights for Anglophones and protesting violations; and provide humanitarian assistance to victims of the conflict. Cameroon has refused to allow the High Commissioner to visit to assess the crisis.

Consequences of the ongoing conflict reported by the UN include:

- summary execution of civilians by Cameroon police and security forces;²
- arrest in Nigeria and deportation to Cameroon of 47 Anglophone community leaders;
- 33,000 students (as of June 2018) unable to attend schools because of abductions, attacks, destruction of schools and safety issues;³
- at least 40 schools burned down;⁴
- mass arrests and arbitrary detentions; and the use of torture and excessive force by security personnel, leading to the displacement of 150,000 people within the country and over 20,000 to neighbouring Nigeria;⁵
- killings, the excessive use of force, burning down of houses, arbitrary detentions and torture by government forces;⁶
- more than 21,000 people fled to neighbouring countries, and 160,000 as of July, internally displaced by the violence, many reportedly hiding in forests;⁷
- kidnappings, targeted killings of police and local authorities, extortion, torching of schools by armed elements.⁸

¹ OHCHR “High Commissioner’s global update of human rights concerns,” 8 March 2018.

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22772>

² *Ibid*

³ CAMEROON: Joint Statement of UNICEF and UNESCO on Abduction of Education Personnel and Attacks Against Schools in The South-West Region of Cameroon, 1 June 2018.

<http://cm.one.un.org/content/unct/cameroon/en/home/presscenter/communiqués-de-presse/cameroon--joint-statement-of-unicef-and-unesco-on-abduction-of-e.html>

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ OHCHR, Opening statement and global update of human rights concerns by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein at 38th session of the Human Rights Council, 18 June 2018.

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=23206&LangID=E>

⁶ OHCHR, UN Human Rights Chief deeply alarmed by reports of serious rights breaches in Cameroon, 25 July 2018,

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23404&LangID=E>

⁷ *Ibid*

⁸ *Ibid*

Since these reports, the situation has worsened with intensified fighting, paralysis of economic activities in the affected regions, and the number of displaced persons has swelled to more than 180,000. The Government of Cameroon continues to fail to promote the recommended dialogue, allow access to UN personnel to assess the situation or to provide humanitarian assistance. In September High Commissioner of Human Rights Michelle Bachelet identified the “pressing need for humanitarian assistance of a “large number of civilians and over 180,000 people forced to take refuge far from their homes.”

During the 3rd Universal Periodic Review of Cameroon (UPR),⁹ many states expressed concerns about inequality and discrimination faced by Cameroon’s English speaking minority, recommending that Cameroon:

- Adopt legislation to protect human rights defenders and journalists;
- Provide transparent information on human rights in Cameroon;
- Grant international agencies access to English speaking separatist leaders extradited from Nigeria and detained incommunicado;
- Investigate disappearances of political opposition representatives, including members of the English speaking minority, and ensure their safe return;
- Respect and ensure citizens’ rights to express their views about addressing the problems of English speaking provinces.

Origins of the Crisis: Cameroon’s Colonial History:

The current crisis has deep roots in Cameroon’s colonial history. From the 1880s to World War I, Cameroon (then Kamerun) was a colony of Germany. As part of the Treaty of Versailles at the end of World War 1, Germany lost its colonies. They were converted to League of Nations mandates under which other countries held administrative oversight of the former colony, but policy control and direction remained with the League of Nations.

Cameroon was mandated to two governments. The northwest and southwest (Anglophone regions) were assigned to the United Kingdom (UK), which also held the colony of Nigeria to the west. The north, east, and south were mandated to France which held other colonies to the east. A major mountain range between the two regions provided a convenient geographic separation. The new dominant colonial languages and administrations then became English and French respectively.

Following World War II the United Nations renewed the British and French mandates to the colonies of Cameroon. British Cameroon was ruled from headquarters in Nigeria until the mid-1950s when a separate administration was established.

Independence movements started to emerge in both the French and British Cameroon colonies in the early 1950s. In 1960, French Cameroon gained independence and became the Cameroun Republic. Later that year Nigeria gained its independence from the UK.

For the British English-speaking Cameroons, the UN Trusteeship organized a referendum. Citizens of the British Cameroons were asked to choose between joining the Cameroun Republic (French) or Nigeria. The referendum did not include an option for independence because of the opposition of the

⁹ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Cameroon, A/HRC/39/15, 10 July 2018, available at: http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/39/15.
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UK representative to the Trusteeship Council who believed that the British Cameroon region could not survive economically on its own.¹⁰

The north part of British Cameroon voted to join Nigeria. The south voted to join the new (French) Cameroun Republic.

A UN resolution in April 1961 supported separate determinations for North and South Cameroons.¹¹ The government of France ignored this, and moved to negotiate on the basis of a unification option. The UN and the British Government did not firmly oppose this, and ultimately acceded to it. The south part of British Cameroon had a larger population, and thus generated a majority of total votes in favour of the French Cameroun option. Despite these concerns about the legitimacy of the referendum, the international community accepted its results, and did not challenge it.

The Federal State

Negotiations to join the British and French Cameroons culminated in the Foumban Conference in July, 1961. After five days of deliberation, the Conference concluded with an agreement that established a federal state, which contained two autonomous regions each headed by a Prime Minister and two official languages (English and French). An executive President and Vice-President would head the state. There would be a National Assembly of fifty members, ten of which came from the new Anglophone region now called West Cameroon.¹² The new federal constitution gave West Cameroon significant autonomy with its own parliament, security force and the right to elect the federal Vice- President.

From the perspective of Anglophone Cameroonians, the new federal state never functioned as it was supposed to. The rights and entitlements promised to Anglophones were largely ignored by the new President, Ahmadou Ahidjo. For much of his presidency, Ahidjo presided over a one party state, and manipulated the administration of West Cameroon, persecuting those who insisted on the rights of Anglophones under the new federal state. His objective appeared to be to undermine the agreed upon federal state, in favour of a unified administration.¹³

Unitary State:

This objective was realized in a referendum in 1972, in which the total population of Cameroon, French and English, were called to vote. The referendum posed a choice between maintaining the existing Federation, or abolishing it in favour of a new unitary state. French Cameroonians outnumbered Anglophones three to one, and the unitary state option was overwhelmingly adopted.¹⁴

The new constitution however pays homage in its preamble to the linguistic and cultural diversity of Cameroon. It also provides that:

¹⁰ UK representative Andrew Cohen opposed the independence option. See: [British Cameroons Referendum, 1961](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Cameroons_referendum): Wikipedia; [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/British Cameroons referendum](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Cameroons_referendum), 1961. See also: Fanso, Verkijika G., History explains why Cameroon is at war with itself over language and culture; <https://theconversation.com/history-explains-why-cameroon-is-at-war-with-itself-over-language-and-culture>

¹¹ UN Voted For Southern Cameroons Independence; Who Overturned The Verdict?: <http://www.cameroonpostline.com/UN-voted-for-southern-Cameroons-independence-who-overturned-the-verdict/>

¹² Decisions of the Foumban Conference; <http://www.camerooncerevision.com/decisions-foundation-conference/>

¹³ Meyomesse, Enoch; Ahidjo's Forceful Takeover; <http://www.cameroonpostline.com/ahidjos-forceful-takeover>

¹⁴ Cohen, Herman J; Cameroon: A Solution from History for Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis: <https://allafrica.com/stories/201803221043.html>

The Republic of Cameroon shall be a decentralized, unitary state. It shall be one and indivisible, secular, democratic and dedicated to social service. It shall recognize and protect traditional values that conform to democratic principles, human rights, and the law. It shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law.

And that:

The Official languages of the Republic of Cameroon shall be English and French, both languages having the same status. The State shall guarantee the promotion of bilingualism throughout the country. It shall endeavour to protect and promote national languages.¹⁵

Since 1972, Anglophone Cameroonians have continued to voice concerns about, and protest their marginalization in the economy and institutions of the unified republic, and the failure of the French dominated government to respect the democratic and linguistic rights protected by the Constitution.¹⁶

Recent Protests – from dissent to humanitarian crisis:

An All Cameroon Anglophone Lawyers Conference in May 2015 called for a renewal of federalism and called for the state to exercise its constitutional duty to protect the Anglophone minority and recognize its history, heritage and culture.¹⁷

The current crisis began in October 2016 with a sit down strike initiated by the Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium, an organization of lawyers' and teachers' unions from the Anglophone regions of Cameroon. Lawyers took to the streets in October to protest the government's disregard for the common law in courts and judicial proceedings, manifested in a massive influx of French speaking and civil law trained lawyers and judges to the Courts of Anglophone Cameroon. Police tear gassed the protesters and courts were closed.

In November, teachers began a sit down strike over the erosion of Anglophone education in English-speaking regions. Schools were closed. Activist Manucho Bibixy launched a "Coffin Revolution" to protect government neglect of Bamenda, the capital of the North West region.

In his year- end address at the end of 2016, President Biya outlawed debate on federalism. In January 2017, the Cameroon government cut off internet access to English speaking regions for three months, alleging that information spread over the internet was fuelling protest movements.

The administration began to arrest and detain leaders of protest movements, including Barrister Felix Agbor Anyior Nkongho, speaker at October 2018 events in Toronto,¹⁸ Ottawa¹⁹ and Montreal,

¹⁵ Constitution of the Republic of Cameroon, Part 1, Article 1, Paragraphs 2 and 3. Extracted from: [Constituteproject.org: Cameroon's Constitution of 1972 with amendments through 2008: http://extwprlegs1.fao.org/docs/pdf/cmr117236E.pdf](http://extwprlegs1.fao.org/docs/pdf/cmr117236E.pdf)

¹⁶ See: Sixtus, Mbom: [Cameroon's Descent into Crisis: The Long History of Anglophone Discord](https://www.irinnews.org/news/2017/10/04/Cameroon-s-descent-crisis-long-history); Irinnews.org: Yaounde, 4 October, 2017: <https://www.irinnews.org/news/2017/10/04/Cameroon-s-descent-crisis-long-history>

¹⁷ Voice of the Oppressed: [Resolutions: All Cameroon Common Law Lawyers' Conference: http://www.neboufuh.com/2015/05/resolutions-all-Cameroon-common-law-lawyers-conference-1.htm](http://www.neboufuh.com/2015/05/resolutions-all-Cameroon-common-law-lawyers-conference-1.htm).

¹⁸ Crisis in Cameroon: Conversation with Felix Nkongho, Law Society of Ontario, 25 October 2018, <http://www.lawsocietygazette.ca/event/crisis-in-cameroon/>

¹⁹ Human Rights and Humanitarian Situation in Anglophone Cameroon: How Can Canada Help? 30 October 2018, 4-6 pm, Centre de recherche et d'enseignement sur les droits de la personne, University of Ottawa. <https://cdp-hrc.uottawa.ca/fr/30-octobre-human-rights-and-humanitarian-situation-anglophone-cameroon-how-can-canada-help>

Mancho Bibixy, Paul Anya Abine, and Dr. Fontin Neba. President Biya ended legal proceedings against Felix Agbor Anyior Nkongho, Fontin Neba, and Paul Ayah Abine by decree in August 2017 and released them from jail.²⁰ After 18 months in detention, Mancho Bibixy was sentenced by a military tribunal to fifteen years in prison and a fine equivalent to more than 400,000 Euros on charges of “acts of terrorism,” “secession,” “propagation of false information,” “revolution,” “insurrection,” “contempt of public bodies and public servants,” and “hostility against the homeland” under the Law on the Suppression of Acts of Terrorism No. 28 of 2014, and the Cameroonian Criminal and Penal Codes.²¹ The charges were all related to a speech about the marginalization of Anglophones in Western Cameroon that he made while standing in a coffin in November 2016 in the city of Bamenda. Hundreds of other protesters remain in detention.

In September 2017, President Biya attended a UN General Assembly Meeting in New York. While he was there, protests erupted in towns across the Anglophone region to draw the attention of the UN and the international community to the impending crisis. Security forces killed at least 23 people at that time. State authorities then began a campaign of arrest, detention and execution of civilians in the Anglophone regions that precipitated the internal displacement and exodus of large numbers of Anglophone Cameroonians and escalated the protests to the current humanitarian crisis.

On 1 October 2017, the leaders of the Anglophone separatist movement declared independence from Cameroon and announced creation of an interim government of the self-proclaimed “Republic of Ambazonia.” This sparked more violence in the Anglophone regions, and Amnesty International reports that four hundred “ordinary people” have been killed since October 2017.²² On 30 September 2018 the UN Special Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide, Adama Dieng, called, during a BBC televised interview, for an immediate investigation of “concerning atrocities” being committed because of the Anglophone crisis.²³ In January 2018, the interim leaders of the Republic of Ambazonia were arrested in Nigeria and deported back to Cameroon where they have been held incommunicado.

On 7 October 2018, presidential elections were held in Cameroon. There were eight candidates in addition to the incumbent Paul Biya who has been president for 36 years. After election day, the Constitutional Council received 18 petitions from candidates and voters asking for the election results to be annulled and another election held. The petitions alleged fraud, violence and ballot stuffing in favour of President Biya, as well as voter intimidation by the military in Anglophone regions. Cameroon’s electoral body, ELECAM claimed it had no proof of fraud.²⁴ Crisis Group analyst, Hans de Marie Heungoup, reports that voter turnout was 55% in Francophone region and 5% in Anglophone regions.²⁵ On 19 October 2018 the Constitutional Council dismissed the last of the

²⁰ For a summary of this recent history, see: Sixtus, Mbom; Cameroon’s Descent into Crisis: The Long History of Anglophone Discord, supra, footnote 7.

²¹ Lawyers’ Rights Watch Canada has written to protest the arbitrary sentencing and detention of Mancho Bibixy: see: Lawyers’ Rights Watch Canada – Mancho Bibixy Letter July 10, 2018: <http://www/lrwc.org/ws/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Mancho-Bibixy-Letter.10.July.2018.Final.pdf>

²² Cameroon: Horrific Violence Escalates Further in Anglophone Regions, Amnesty International, 18 September 2018. available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2018/09/cameroon-horrific-violence-escalates-further-in-anglophone-regions/>

²³ See: *Investigate Atrocities in Anglophone Cameroon: UN genocide expert*, africanews. Available at <http://www.africanews.com/2018/10/02/investigate-atrocities-in-anglophone-cameroon-un-genocide-expert/>; and BBC World Service – Focus on Africa, *UN calls for investigation in Cameroon*. Video available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w172w23qlz3mb88>

²⁴ Kindzeka, Moki Edwin; *Cameroon’s Election Body Reviewing Petitions to Cancel Presidential Poll*: <https://www.voanews.com/a/cameroon-election-body-petitions-cancel-presidential-poll/4609310.html>

²⁵ *Cameroon Court hears calls for ‘irregular’ elections to be annulled* <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cameroon-election/cameroon-court-hears-calls-for-irregular-election-to-be-annulled-idUSKCN1MQ2CH>

petitions.²⁶ Riot police and security forces were out in force in Douala and Yaoundé to prevent protests of the election results and some online communication systems were blocked.²⁷ On 22 October the President of the Constitutional Council declared the election 'free, fair and credible' and Biya elected.²⁸

²⁶ *Cameroon Constitutional Council dismisses petition for nullification of presidential poll*, Premium Times, 19 October 2018. Available at <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/foreign/africa/291367-cameroon-constitutional-council-dismisses-petition-for-nullification-of-presidential-poll.html>

²⁷ *Cameroon locks down major cities before release of election results*, The Guardian, 21 October 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/21/cameroon-cities-clamp-down-ahead-of-results-in-presidential-election>.

²⁸ *Paul Biya wins Cameroon presidential election with 71.28%*, 22 October 2018, africanews. <http://www.africanews.com/2018/10/22/live-polls-open-in-cameroon-amid-high-security-separatists-killed/>