

Cameroon's conflict forces closure of orphanages – children in limbo

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St. Valentine's Center (orphanage) Buea deserted by its occupants as Cameroon's Anglophone crisis keeps escalating.

The drawn-out conflict which has engulfed Cameroon's English-speaking regions has pitched already vulnerable children in care systems in the restive area into grave danger, with many forced from institutions caring for them and told to "run for your dear lives".

Orphans from institutions that have come under fire are missing.

More uncertain days may lie ahead for orphans. Deadly confrontations pitting government forces against increasingly bold armed English-speaking separatists [risk](#) sliding into full-scale civil war. Thousands of residents have fled their homes in the south-west and north-west regions. In the south-west, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) [estimates](#) that 246,000 people have been internally displaced. A further 21,000 have crossed over the border to Nigeria. Those who have stayed behind have been living one day at the time as the country awaits result of a contentious presidential election in which Paul Biya, in power for 36 years, is heavily favoured. Biya rejects the separatists' demands as well as calls for the creation of a federal state.

In Ekondo Titi; a town in the south-west region where the government owns a Center for Children in Distress (CAED), the traditional ruler of the locality, Chief Issoh Itoh Stephen, was dragged out of church during a service and murdered by gunmen. The kids at CAED Ekondo Titi have remained in their facility at the mercy of the warring parties.



Orphans of St. Valentine's Center Buea pose for a picture with their guardian, Ayah Paul (in white)

A care home for girls – St. Valentine's Center in the town of Akwaya – was attacked by government troops last month. "Gripped by fear, everyone ran helter-skelter," says Ayah Ayah Abine, Executive Director of Ayah Foundation; which runs the center.

Of the 36 orphans the center was hosting, only six have been accounted for and moved to a safer site. Abine said the uncertain security situation makes it difficult to search for the missing orphans. "We have not thought of closing the orphanage. Where will the children go to? The government is very wicked and the system is fragile," Abine says.

Orphaned and then denied protection

Emile and Emilia, twins aged eight, were orphaned this year when their father was beheaded in Belo in the north-west region. The Ayah Foundation took charge of the orphans and moved them 360 km to Buea, where they were given a new home for as long as they needed in St. Valentine's Centre Buea.

But tragedy struck again. Their orphanage was attacked by armed men in military fatigues.

Emile, Emilia and 23 others, including eight orphans brought in from a refugee camp in Nigeria, barely survived the encounter. "On September 15, 2018, we did take the entire inmates and staff of the centre to safety," Ayah Paul, Founder of St. Valentine's Center, said in a statement.

Most communities over a 70 km stretch between Buea and Kumba in the south-west region are deserted and [videos](#) show some being burnt to ashes. Managers of at least six orphanages hosting over 150 orphans shut down their institutions. Some orphans as young as five were left to fend for themselves.

"The fire power was so heavy and confusion reigned in the air," said one manager in the town of Muyuka, asking that his name not be used for security reasons. "I ordered them: 'Run for your dear lives'. And everyone took to their heels."

That, the manager said, was the last time he saw the children.



St. Valentine's Center (orphanage) Buea deserted by its occupants as Cameroon's Anglophone crisis keeps escalating.

Njikem Neville, a social worker, said in Kumba that orphans have been victims of forced movements. "Displaced orphans have reached us, some after trekking over long distances with headloads, and they have been amongst beneficiaries of relief items provided by Caritas in Fiango-Kumba," Neville said.

One of the orphans was spotted at the Mile 17 Motor Park in Buea.

His eyes streaming with tears and holding a battered travel bag with his bandaged left hand, 16-year old Sam was struggling to board a bus to the commercial port city of Douala.

"I am tired of listening to gun shots and seeing lifeless bodies here and there. I just want to go where I can sleep with both eyes closed and be sure to get up alive," Sam said. He seemed unworried about moving to a destination without a host.

Recurrent fighting in Ekona Town forced the lone orphanage run by Hope Alive Foundation to close and relocate its two residents to a safe site a few km away. But it was immediately overwhelmed by seven more displaced orphans.

"Things have been extremely difficult for us as we have left our fief over safety concerns. Ekona Town had become a fierce battle ground and all living things had to flee," said Horance Angabu, the Project Coordinator of Hope Alive Foundation. With a shoestring budget, he says the institution has found it difficult to house and feed the orphans.

Many rights organisations have condemned government actions — and inaction.

"We are deeply concerned by the disappearance of several orphans... In times of conflict, international humanitarian law gives protection priority to vulnerable destitute persons amongst whom are women and children. The disappearance of these children constitutes a violation of their rights to life, shelter, education and wellbeing," says Blaise Chamango, the head of Human is Right, an NGO in Buea.

Trying moments

Since the beginning of the year, operations by security forces to quell dissent have met ferocious resistance from insurgents bent on creating a state dubbed Ambazonia to right what they see as systematic disregard for English-speakers by Cameroon's francophone majority.

The secessionist movement emerged after strikes in late 2016 by English-speaking lawyers and then teachers against the imposition of French. Stoked by the government's uncompromising action in putting down dissent, mass protests ensued.

At least 400 civilians have been killed in the past year by government troops and separatists, [according](#) to Amnesty International. The rights group says many deaths and casualties go unreported.

The conflict is raging at a particularly difficult moment for Cameroon.

The central African nation is enduring economic shocks from the drop in the price of oil and other commodities. Spending on the fight against Boko Haram Islamist insurgents and the influx of refugees from Nigeria and the Central African Republic have stressed government coffers. A government plan for emergency humanitarian assistance plan for the north-west and south-west regions worth FCFA 12.7 billion is handicapped by a lack of funds.

Residents also have misgivings of a plan initiated by the government while hostilities persist.

The conflict has also halted all discussion on how the government intends to ensure the well-being of orphans as set down by the United Nations, specifically the move in many countries to take children out of institutions and find alternative solutions. Many countries, like [Rwanda](#), have closed down orphanages.

Epaphrodite Nsabimana, a child therapist based in Rwanda, says institutional care is more expensive than other forms of care. He holds that it is unnecessary and damaging — citing delayed cognitive development, vulnerability to abuse, poor physical development and lower self-esteem.

Kum Joseph, a carpenter who spent 16 years in a small orphanage in Fiango in the city of Kumba, has no doubt his life would have been better had he never lived in the orphanage. "I always felt I was an outcast. As we grew up, there was no proper follow-up," Joseph recounted.

Reforms would also run up against resistance from orphanage owners.

Before the conflict, orphanages tended to be run by individuals and missionary bodies. Officials of the Ministry of Social Affairs say the government, with the help of international development partners, had tried to transition from institutional care to community-based care, but faced a backlash from proprietors and the project made little headway.

Like many other countries, Cameroon still lacks accurate statistics on the number of children living in care systems.

Nwana née Dinga Caroline Nabit, Sub Director for Social Re-adaptation of Children in the Ministry of Social Affairs, blames the lack of data on the clandestine nature in which orphanages operate. Proprietors, she said, do not update data on children in their care or give misleading figures to secure funding.



Women and children at the Mile 17 Motor Park fleeing the restive region.

The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) says nearly 2.7 million children aged up to 17 are estimated to be living in residential care globally, with some 126,000 in West and Central Africa. A more recent tally by UNICEF [puts](#) the number at 2 million, though the U.N. agency notes that it is likely to be underestimated due to underreporting.

Common Ground

There are few signs of any serious move to work out a solution to end a conflict rooted in Cameroon’s history – and the formation of a state which secured independence with a legacy of British and French colonial rulers.

But some voices are now calling for both sides to find common ground.

Dr. Willibroad Dze-Ngwa, an Associate Professor of Political History and International Relations at the University of Yaounde I, says both parties have to back down from extreme positions.

“There is need for a middle point,” Dze-Ngwa said in Yaounde. According to the university don, government is not genuinely willing to dialogue. Dze-Ngwa sees the actions taken so far by government as adopting the “magic of silence strategy”, with the hope that time will solve the problem. However, as time passes by, the problem keeps degenerating.

Cameroon crisis threatens wildlife as thousands flee to protected areas

BY [AMINDEH BLAISE ATABONG](#)

JULY 12, 2018

Many displaced by the conflict are fleeing to biodiversity hotspots, clearing forests to build homes and hunting endangered animals for survival.



Cameroon is one of the most biodiverse countries in the world and home to over 20 protected reserves. Credit: Ollivier Girard/CIFOR.

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Around midday in the lush bushlands of western [Cameroon](#), Nsong Gabriel enters a small makeshift hut to get a cup of the local brew. He carries his old rifle in one arm and drags along his rewards from his hunt with the other: a porcupine, caught in a trap he laid the previous day, and two monkeys.

He complains that this has been a relatively unproductive expedition. "Most often, I get alligators, porcupines, monkeys, antelopes, snakes and bush swine," he says. But it is at least something, and he will be able to trade the animals for essentials.

"I exchange them for a bit of cash and basic items like Maggi, salt and rice brought in by those who come here to buy bush meat," he explains.

Gabriel wasn't always a hunter. Until recently, he was a primary school teacher, but then the [unrest](#) in Cameroon's two Anglophone regions began. The turmoil started as low-level protests in the North West and South West regions over perceptions that the central Francophone-dominated government was discriminating against English-speakers. But it quickly spiralled into a full-blown crisis. The government clamped down violently on activists. Armed separatists calling for a new state of Ambazonia emerged. And both separatists and security forces are now engaging in deadly attacks, with villagers often caught in the mix.

Like many others, Gabriel's life turned upside down and he was forced to flee his home. According to UN estimates, he was one of around [160,000](#) to face the same fate. Many resettled in nearby national parks, wildlife sanctuaries and forest reserves.

"More than half of these people have invaded and remained in these habitats," says Kari Jackson Bongnda, Executive Director of Sustainable Run for Development (SURUDEV).

Gabriel was one of them and, with survival his priority, he soon turned to hunting bush meat. Most of the animals he kills are protected under Cameroonian law, but he is rarely short of buyers given how the conflict has made the trade of several other foods more difficult. Road blocks by the so-called Amba Boys have interrupted the transport of imported frozen fish from the port city of Douala. Cattle rustling along major highways has scared breeders from bringing their stocks to market. And the uncertainty in the region has made it difficult to domesticate chickens, goats and pigs locally.

Many people have had to turn to bush meat both to eat and to earn an income. According to environmental specialists, this has made endangered species highly vulnerable.

"The result, which would be devastating to conservation, would be migration of wildlife to safer habitats, which might not necessarily be their niches, resulting in consequent extinction," says Kari Jackson.

The situation is so critical that Louis Nkembi, founder of the local NGO Environmental and Rural Development Foundation (ERuDeF), believes the government should declare an ecological emergency. "In the Lebialem highlands, elephants have been liable to poaching. Now with the crisis, the activity has skyrocketed," he says. "Endemic endangered apes of Cameroon, especially gorillas and monkeys too are being decimated."

Ordinarily, these unique environmental areas would be guarded, but rangers have been forced to flee in turn. A Divisional Delegate of the Forestry and Wildlife ministry confirmed that most had deserted the area in the last month.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, one former eco-guard at Bakossi National Park described how unknown gunmen had assaulted him, leaving him injured, before ordering him to vacate his post. "I barely survived, thanks to God," he said.

Another ranger claimed a group of displaced people threatened him into leaving too. "I had to run for my dear life," he confessed. "I couldn't stake my life to protect that of an animal."

Clearing the forest

As well as endangering Cameroon's protected species, the movement of people fleeing the conflict has also resulted to deforestation and damage to biodiversity hotspots. In parts of the Bakundu Forest Reserve, for instance, significant sections of trees have been cut down to make space for new villages and to be used as construction materials and fuel.

"The displaced persons have been left at the mercy of their new environment and will do just anything for survival, irrespective of the long-term consequences," says Tabangmua Danisius, Director of Forestry and Environment Conservation Society (FOECONS). "In some areas we have visited, people are using chemicals like gamalin to fish in their quest to get protein."

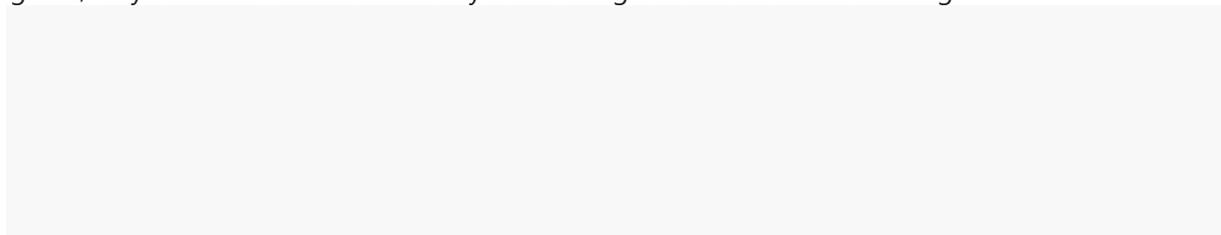
Describing the situation as "catastrophic", he warns that human activity is contaminating land and water, contributing to soil erosion, and destroying the habitats needed for rare plants and animals to survive.

An employee at the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF)'s Coastal Forest Programme, echoed these concerns. "The already dicey environmental situation in the troubled area is now worrisome," they said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

As part of the Bonn Challenge initiative, Cameroon [pledged](#) to reinstate more than 12 million hectares of deforested and degraded land by 2030. Experts celebrated this was the biggest commitment made in the species-rich Congo Basin, home to the world's second-largest tropical rain forest. However, this lofty vision looks like it will be thwarted by the continuous pressure on ecosystems as Cameroon's crisis rages on with no end in sight.

This could damage Cameroon's rich and unique environment irreversibly. But for the thousands of people uprooted by the conflict and forced to run from their homes, there are few alternatives when the priority is simply survival until the conflict abates.

"All I do is hunting. Early in the morning, I go out to check my traps which I must have set by evening the previous day. Late in the night, I move out with my gun and torchlight in search of game," says Gabriel. "I don't have any other thing I do here besides hunting."



Inside ‘Ambazonia’: The Sorry Story of a Long-drawn, Neglected Conflict

By Amindeh Blaise Atabong* (Special to *The Voice* newspaper)
December 17, 2018

The drawn-out conflict which has engulfed Cameroon’s English-speaking regions has pitched people in the restive area into grave danger. For close to three years, the world has silently watched on as killings unfold, reminiscent of the brutal wars in Africa as was the case of Rwanda, Liberia and Sierra Leone. In this report, investigative journalist Amindeh Blaise Atabong highlights the daily untold suffering and the new normal way of life after spending days in the restive areas.

MUYUKA, Cameroon – It is a bright Friday afternoon at the Buea Regional Hospital Mortuary. The sweet Buea Mountain breeze gently blows through the courtyard of the morgue. The blazing sunshine is lighting up the picturesque narrow street that leads to the morgue but the atmosphere looks gloomy.

The turnout in hundreds that usually characterises removal of corpses in this mortuary on Friday is absent. But that doesn’t suggest the morgue is empty or corpses will not be removed on that day. One of the morticians tells me that both compartments of the mortuary are full beyond capacity.

“Some 21 corpses will be taken out today. The number keeps increasing and it is giving us much work. This was not the case two years ago when the crisis had not started,” one of the undertakers said, blowing out cigarette smoke with dexterity and returning to his duty post – the mortuary’s corpse-washer room.

Just a few meters ahead, Mbangsi Sidonice, 32, a new widow, is standing in low spirits. She is dressed in a completely black outfit and holding a handkerchief well soaked with tears that continuously and profusely run down her cheeks from her swollen eyes.

Mbangsi is waiting at the morgue to get the corpses of her husband and only two children. She says they were brutally shot a week earlier in Muea by soldiers on board a fast-moving armoured personnel carrier on patrol. “I would have been shot too, but two bullets missed me and hit another pedestrian whom I think eventually died,” she says, further breaking down in tears. Mbangsi feels it would have been better if she too was killed as she has little hope for survival in the absence of her family which she considers her “bundle of joy”.

I joined Mbangsi in the wait, with her sympathisers who could barely make up a football squad. And 45 minutes later, the mortician notified that the corpses were ready for collection. The dead bodies were put in three caskets, which seemed to have been hastily fabricated, and then wedged on the cargo space of a minivan. They zoomed off for burial.

Mbangsi can be counted among the lucky ones who have had the opportunity to give their dead ones a befitting burial or even a burial at all. Reports of abandoned corpses littered on the streets have been legion in the last two years which have seen an escalating conflict ravage Cameroon's English-speaking region. Continued fighting has forced many to flee, leaving behind the dead to bury the dead. Local rights organisations indicate over 1,000 civilians, armed separatists and government soldiers have been killed so far in a conflict rooted in the country's peculiar bilingual colonial history.

Cameroon Vs Cameroun

The semi-permanent division between Cameroonians can be traced to country's history as a creation from colonial deal-making between Britain and France, and at one point, Germany.

Present day Cameroon, along with some neighbouring regions, became a German colony on July 5, 1884. However, after World War I in which Germany was defeated, the territory was split between Britain and France in 1919 and was to be administered as a League of Nations-mandated territory. While France got the lion's share of the territory and called it French Cameroun, Britain got about a quarter and called it British Cameroons; British Southern Cameroons and British Northern Cameroons.

French Cameroun in the late 1950s became recognized as a state, and it took the status of a French-associated territory after a popular uprising. And on January 1, 1960, French Cameroun obtained independence as La Republique du Cameroun.

At the time, the British Cameroons were still being administered from Lagos, Nigeria by Britain as trust territories.

In the wake of the struggle for independence in British Cameroons, the regions' politicians were campaigning on three options: gaining independence as an independent state, joining the Federal Republic of Nigeria, or association with La Republique du Cameroun. But on February 11, 1961, the United Nations organized a plebiscite in British Cameroons with only two options of integration with Nigeria or association with La Republique du Cameroun. The option of gaining independence as an independent state was ruled out. While British Northern Cameroons gained independence by integrating with Nigeria, British Southern Cameroons joined La Republique du Cameroun on October 1, 1961, to form the Federal Republic of Cameroon. West Cameroon (Anglophone) and East Cameroon (Francophone) became the two federal states.

Over the years, the former French and former British colonies have maintained their respective versions of Francophone and Anglophone governmental and legal systems, meaning the country has been split based on its colonial history.

Outburst of Anger

According to Ndengu Francis Epie, a veteran Cameroonian journalist who lived through the reunification experience, the Anglophone trouble started with the July 1961 Fomfong conference which was held to discuss the terms of the union. Ndengu noted that, while John Ngu Foncha, the architect of independence by forming a federation with La Republique du Cameroun, had a confederation in mind, the then-president Ahmadou Ahidjo of the already independent La Republique du Cameroun had a unitary state in mind.

Over the years, decisions have been taken without proper consultation of West Cameroon officials, prompting the people of the region feel dominated in the union which was supposed to be of equal status.

In 1972, a referendum changed the constitution to a unitary state, as well as the name of the country to United Republic of Cameroon. The name of the country was later changed to Republic of Cameroon, reverting to the name of former French Cameroun, La Republique du Cameroun.

While many Cameroonians celebrate the bilingual nature of the country, an increasing number of people in Anglophone Cameroon have grown frustrated with what they see as being sidelined by their own country.

Anglophones, who make up 20 per cent of Cameroon's estimated 23 million population, have over time felt marginalized by the Francophone-dominated government in the socio-cultural, political and economic spheres. Paul Biya, 85, a Francophone Cameroonian, has since 1982 ruled the central African nation and recently got re-elected to extend his 36-year rule by another seven years. The current uprising has simply been a manifestation of frustration arising from long-term deprivation as well as both real and perceived discrimination.

In October 2016, a group of Anglophone lawyers started objecting the appointment of French-educated judges with Civil Law background to their courts operating under the Common Law system. A few other frustrated groups, key amongst them Anglophone teachers, later joined them in peaceful protest against other government actions they perceived to be discriminating against the country's English-speaking regions; North West and South West Regions.

Government did not respond to their grievances with tact, and that initial modest protest spiralled into Cameroon's most alarming internal conflict since independence. At the moment, scores of civilians are being killed. Running battles between the government's elite Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR), which is usually seen combatting Boko Haram, and increasingly bold armed separatists have caused mass displacement of people.

In November 2018, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) said the number of Cameroonian refugees fleeing the conflict has crossed the 30,000 mark. In the South West Region alone, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that 246,000 people have been internally displaced.

At the onset of the crisis, the government's instinct has been to respond to protest and grievances with force. Dr. Willibroad Dze-Ngwa, an Associate Professor of Political History and International Relations at the University of Yaounde I, posits the government has been adopting the "magic of silence strategy", with the hope that time will solve the problem. "But as time passes by, the problem keeps degenerating and both conflicting parties keep taking extreme positions," he said.

The early mass protests in late-2016 were met with mass arrests and the deployment of armed-to-the-teeth security forces. In January 2017, there was brief hope that dialogue would lead to a resolution. But these talks fell apart as the government banned the umbrella group with which it was negotiating and detained its leaders.

Since then, the government has not seemed to return to the negotiation table. It has empowered the police, gendarmes and army to use heavy force. It has also shut down the region's internet on at least two occasions resulting to a total 230-day blackout.

In the South West Region; which has borne the highest brunt of the conflict and where most of the fighting has taken place, suspected government troops have razed over 70 communities, according to the Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa (CHRDA). Locals have been left desperate for shelter and safety.

The government's highhanded response pushed many Anglophones, even moderates, to the extreme. They took up arms and are now gaining in support, especially from the diaspora, and in resolve to create a breakaway country of their own they would call 'Ambazonia'.

Welcome to the self-proclaimed Federal Republic of Ambazonia (Southern Cameroons); a virtual country of many sins.

Military Excesses

Its Friday December 14, 2018, and the Mile 17 bus station in Buea, capital of the South West Region, is busy like a beehive. Vehicles are loading mostly to the seaside resort town of Limbe; a relatively calm town in the restive Anglophone region, to the port city of Douala; in one of the eight Francophone regions, and to the capital city Yaounde.

Lucas Achamba, a middle age man with grey eyes, limped off his seat from the waiting room towards a stationed Coaster passenger bus. Though holding a crutch, he is assisted by a bus conductor. The circa eight meters covered left Achamba in excruciating pains. "Na which kind badluck dis [What a badluck!]," he murmured in broken English as he regretted what befell him.

I accosted Achamba, who sat with difficulty in the bus, and engaged him in a chat through the bus's window. His voice was as odd as his swollen body, it was low-pitched and quavering. Achamba said he had been severely tortured a few days ago at a checkpoint manned by ruthless soldiers in Bolifamba Mile Buea.

"Three hefty soldiers pulled me out of the taxi. They bounced on me severally. They broke my bones," Achamba said. He disclosed that the soldiers also butted him with their guns until he went unconscious. It was then the soldiers allowed him thinking he had died.

Achamba's only 'crime' was that he had put on a T-shirt, whose colours resembled the blue-white flag of Ambazonia.

"It thanks to God that I cheated dead after spending five days in hospital," Achamba said, trying to relieve himself from pain. He said he was going to Yaounde to live with a cousin, only to return if the conflict ends. "I can't continue staying in a place I can't sleep with both eyes closed," he averred and we parted company.

I then sluggishly moved towards a car which was clandestinely loading passengers to Muyuka; a town located on the leeward side of Mt. Cameroon and some 26km from Buea. Clandestine transportation is in vogue following the conflict and about the easiest means to travel to Muyuka by public transportation.

The cash-crazy driver with a bandaged right hand crammed eight of us in a car meant for five. He then charged each person 1,000 CFA franc, twice the normal fare before the onset of the crisis.

When all of us had paid and the driver secured his money, he swiftly connected two cables near the brake pedal to ignite the engine of the rickety car. The driver then hit the road to Muyuka.

The 70km road from Buea, through Muyuka, to Kumba is void of people. Only soldiers and armed separatists mount checkpoints at intervals. Settlements have either been razed or abandoned by fleeing locals. The view along the journey smacks of atrocities. Buildings along the road are riddled with multiple bullet holes. Carcasses of burnt-out vehicles lined up the road, with flames still reducing some to ashes.

Our journey unfolds smoothly and no one seems interested to talk to the other. A very severe fright has gripped all passengers, except for one lad sitting next to the driver. Throughout the journey, he keeps gently singing a song that sounded as though he had overcome fear. Others simply remain pious in prayer and meditation.

Then, the driver broke the silence: “These La Republique people [soldiers] are very wicked.” Wicked and merciless as many say they are in their counter-insurgency operations, no one reacted to his utterance.

The driver reminded his passengers to make sure that no one has anything in his smart phone that relates to the ‘struggle’, as we approached the last military checkpoint to Muyuka. ‘Struggle’ is the word secessionists use to refer to their effort to restore the statehood of Southern Cameroons.

As we approached a barricade mounted by the troops, one trigger-happy soldier, who had presumably not put up to three years in the corps, halted our car with a show of the hand. His approach was intimidating and provocative. Yet, everyone held his or her calm.

The driver told us we were to alight the car, with identification documents in hand, then walk past the barricade for control. We did as it is a routine along highways in the restive area.

All of us were cleared to continue the journey but for the young man who sat near the driver.

“You are one of the Amba Boys,” the soldier put it to the lad. The young man quickly denied he was one of them. Amba Boys is the general name to refer to all armed separatist fighters.

The lad tried to defend himself and prove that he wasn’t a separatist fighter but luck wasn’t on his side. He was whisked off by two soldiers, who grabbed him on his waist belt and kept on punching him haphazardly as they took him to their makeshift base, just behind the Muyuka police station.

We left without any of the passengers altering a word. The atmosphere in the car became tenser, enveloped in murmur, until we got to Muyuka. It was there the passengers mustered courage to condemn the excesses of the military.

In Muyuka, the driver dropped us inside the park, precisely around a spot where a Catholic priest, Rev. Fr Alexander Nougi Sop, died from a controversial stray bullet in July 2018.

‘Popping Corn’

Muyuka used to be a bustling small town but a lot of people have moved away over the last two years. Only a few daredevil residents have stayed behind. Those who remained have been living one day at the time, Nkeng Paul, a resident, said

The town harbours a good number of armed separatists, majority of them belonging to the key rebel group - Ambazonia Defence Forces (ADF). And it is a hotspot for running battles between government soldiers and armed separatists.

‘Popcorn’ is a new parlance in the troubled English-speaking regions of Cameroon. It refers to gunshots when government troops and Amba Boys clash, with often lethal consequences.

Since the start of December, residents say no day goes by without the warring parties ‘popping corn’. Residents have quickly accustomed to the sound which no longer scares them as before.

“At times when you hear the shots, you may think they are coming from near. But far from it,” Nkeng stated. He said they are tired of always running from their Makanga neighbourhood in Muyuka into the bushes each time ‘popping corn’ is in progress. “My two brothers and I resolved to always wait until we perceive the gunshot is near and danger looms in the air before taking to our heels.”

As we were having the exchange in Makanga junction in Muyuka, a gun battle erupted about a kilometre from where we were. Heavy gunshots reigned in the air, and the next thing was confusion, total confusion. Residents started running helter-skelter while some were helpless. To many, the fear of ‘popcorn’ is the beginning of wisdom.

I moved away from the gunshots, inwards towards Makanga street, but the thundering of the guns kept coming closer. Little did I know I was on the escape route of the Amba Boys who were being pursued by soldiers with heavy artillery.

Minutes later, two Amba Boys on board a motorbike on top speed run pass me. “Water Na Water,” they shouted, to mean they are immune to bullets. A couple others follow, some on foot, others on automobile. They fought back the approaching army, shooting one bullet at the time with their Dane guns as they retreated.

I took cover in some nearby banana plants, shielded by a large volcanic rock.

As the Amba Boys were headed towards their camp, the army followed, shooting sporadically at houses and the escaping fighters before ending their high-speed pursuit and making a U-turn. But not without killing one fighter and a civilian whose head was shattered in cold blood.

After the confrontation which was brief, lasting about 30 minutes, it emerged that the Amba Boys had attempted to ambush trucks loaded with cocoa under military escort from Kumba to

Douala. About three weeks earlier, residents say the Amba Boys had succeeded to intercept and burn two 20-ton trucks fully loaded with cocoa and bound for the port city of Douala.

Amba Atrocities

In their quest to establish a country of their own, Amba Boys have had their hands stained with blood. Like the military, they have also carried out arson attacks, maimed, abducted, raped, killed and carried out other atrocities.

International rights advocacy group, Human Rights Watch has documented evidence of abuses perpetrated by the separatists, as well as the government. Last month, the US Department of State expressed concerns over the uptick in violence in Cameroon.

“We urge an immediate halt to the indiscriminate targeting of civilians and burning of houses by Cameroonian government forces and to attacks perpetrated by both Anglophone separatists against security forces and civilians,” Heather Nauert, Department Spokesperson said. But the call seems to have fallen on deaf ears.

Amba Boys keep subjecting civilians and soldiers to sickening cruelty and heart-breaking stories keep emerging.

In a bid to cripple the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC); a state-owned agro-industrial company whose plantations are mostly found in the South West Region, suspected separatists chopped off the finger of six labourers in Tiko in November 2018.

“The people [Amba Boys] arrived when we were packing our bags and farm tools to leave. One of them shouted: ‘How many times have we asked you not to work here again.’ Then one of them ordered us to put our hands on tree trunks and they started cutting. Some of our colleagues who wanted to escape were shot,” Christopher Ongene, 27, one of the victims, told reporters. He was still reeling from the attack.

The separatist fighters have been taking bold actions to stamp their authority, oblivious of the adverse effects it may have on the people they claim to fight for.

In Yoke-Muyuka, the Amba Boys have setup a customs post by the banks of River Mungo. Just across is Pendamboko, a community in the French-speaking Littoral Region. Here, I met a couple of Amba Boys turned customs officer wielding machetes. The only one who held an artisanal pistol was said to be the chief customs officer.

“We are in charge here,” one of them, who gave his name as Commander Sabi, told me in a hostile tone. “We levy customs duties on goods that cross our borders. The funds are then used to finance the war,” he added, before hysterically shouting: “Ambazonia must be free.” The other Amba customs officers joined in acclamation.

Locals who use that route, mostly to their farms, tell stories of coercion. “At times they charged us exorbitant fees for clearance. But we just have to pay to be free from their wrath,” a road user, who elected anonymity for fear of reprisals, disclosed.

In the next locality, precisely Malende Muyuka, the ADF often mounts a checkpoint along the Kumba-Buea road. Theirs is even more rigorous, time-sapping and dreaded.

When vehicles stop for control, the fighters, who seem to know no smile, inch closer in search of their target – soldiers in civilian attire, top government functionaries and those they consider as traitors. Woebitide anyone who is asked to step down.

After their control, they beseech travellers to support the ‘struggle’ so they can get ‘groundnuts’ (bullets for their Dane guns). The donation is voluntary, but their looks can easily push one into submission.

In Muyuka, I met an Amba Boy who left active combat for health reasons. Timothy (not real name), 32, spends all day at home and is being catered for by his sick old mother. His left leg is ripe for amputation after he incurred multiple gun shots during combat. But Timothy is unperturbed.

“I can’t go to the hospital because I will be arrested and certainly killed by the wicked Biya regime,” he says. “I prefer to die here – for my people.”

Timothy wasn’t always a stony-hearted person until the conflict broke out. People who know him say he was a jovial, social and peace-loving cocoa farmer in Muyenge before he was pushed to the extremes.

“I can never forgive them [government soldiers],” Timothy vowed without mincing words. He recalled the day government soldiers invaded Muyenge; a small farming community around Muyuka and turn his life up-side-down.

“The soldiers entered the village in truck loads and started shooting and setting ablaze houses. I held my heavily pregnant wife and we started running but she couldn’t run as I could. Suddenly, out of tension, she started labouring.”

Timothy disclosed that when the soldiers came so close, he hid his young wife and ran into the bush to get help. “But upon my return, I only discovered my wife’s dead body ridden with bullet wounds and the baby lying dead near her and still attached through the umbilical cord,” he said, struggling to hold his tears. Then next thing was revenge.

The Amba Boy confessed it didn’t take him up to a week to stab a soldier to death with a poisoned dagger. Even in his present state, he still holds the dagger as a self-defence weapon, even though unconvincingly.

“We have gotten rid of many of our enemies. We prefer taking them down with bear hands when we come face-to-face in order not to waste scarce ‘groundnuts’ [bullets].” Timothy has no regret taking down any life he considers as enemy.

“They [soldiers] roasted three of ours. So, we show no mercy in return,” Timothy said, nodding his head enthusiastically.

Such are the occurrences which inform the actions and inactions of the warring parties.

Sex for Survival

The drawn-out conflict which has engulfed most parts of the North West and South West Regions has aggravated pre-existing vulnerabilities for girls and women and pitched them

into grave danger. Approximately 68 per cent of Cameroon's IDPs are said to be women, according to Cameroon's Department of Civil Protection.

As schools have been disrupted since 2016, and hospitals and entire villages destroyed (mostly by government forces), the educational prospects of a generation of young people, especially girls, are being affected.

In towns and villages in the troubled areas, women and girls have been the victims of multiple cases of sexual exploitation, perpetrated either by the armed separatists or by government soldiers. To navigate the dusk-to-dawn curfew in some parts of the restive region, to gain favours or avoid the threat of reprisals, some women are forced to offer sex in exchange for protection or survival.

For those who manage to escape to the safety of Cameroon's major cities such as the commercial hub of Douala and the capital city of Yaoundé, women often encounter various challenges when attempting to find work and accommodation.

As a result, some young women find themselves engaging in sex work in order to survive.

In one of the new commercial sex hotspots opened by Anglophone IDPs in Bonaberi in Douala, the trade is increasingly attracting a huge clientele.

When I visited the place, it was surprising to see the swiftness with which sex is negotiated and the deal sealed. Two women, endowed with all goodness of womanhood – big boobs, charming smile and killer lips, stood directly opposite me and were beckoning.

A moment later, three other ladies, who must have squeezed their undulating hips into some elastic trousers Made in China, walked pass by. And there were over a dozen ladies of all shapes and sizes, standing in a linear pattern by the side of the road like commodities in a supermarket waiting to be demanded.

“You don't look like someone who is here to get pleasure,” one of the Anglophone sex workers who approached me said. She then begged for financial support. “I do this [sex work] out of frustration. I just need money to take care of myself and three siblings.”

Rita Agbor, a gender officer for the feminist advocacy group Women For a Change (WFAC) Cameroon notes that the situation is really worrying. “One can find as many as 13 or 14 girls sharing a single room, where each one has her turn to go in search of men and provide food for the others.”

There have also been a number of rapes reported, with many more going unreported. In one of the most high-profile cases, Arthur Mbida, a government soldier, is currently standing trial for allegedly raping a 17-year old lactating mother at a military check point in Bamenda this July.

Neglected Conflict

It is close to three years since the conflict broke out in Anglophone Cameroon, yet the World silently watches as the maiming and killings unfold, reminiscent of brutal wars in Africa as was the case of Rwanda, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

International, regional and national dignitaries, including UN Secretary General António Guterres and Commonwealth Secretary General Patricia Scotland, have called for dialogue to resolve the crisis. Even the government of Cameroon and some Anglophone moderates see dialogue as the only way out of the conflict.

But no one has so far taken concrete steps to see that meaningful dialogue takes place in order to end the sufferings and killings.

The UK, the UN, France, the US and China have issued carefully worded statements calling for an end to hostilities – and ended at lip service. Cameroon's ongoing conflict, which can likely slide into a full-blown civil war, threatens the wider West African region's long and short term stability as the world keeps neglecting it.

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