

## Escalation of the Anglophone crisis

Short note – 21 January 2020

### Situation Overview

Parliamentary and municipal elections scheduled for February 9 2020 are intensifying an escalation of the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon. On 7 January 2020, fighters from the Ambazonian separatist group burned down the Elections Cameroon (ELECAM) office in Misaje commune, Donga Mantung division in Northwest region (*Journal du Cameroon* 08/01/2020). The action was to reiterate their earlier decision not to participate in legislative and municipal council elections scheduled for 9 February 2020. The Ambazonian Governing Council (AGovC) have stated that campaigning and talking about the elections by the populace in the proclaimed Ambazonia region is criminal (*Twitter* 26/12/2019). The decision not to participate in the elections and the subsequent attack have heightened tensions in the Northwest and Southwest regions, increasing protection and displacement risks for people living in these regions.

This escalation of the Anglophone crisis follows separatists' 1 December 2019 attempted shooting of a commercial plane landing in the Northwest, and the abduction of around 40 candidates of the parliamentary and municipal elections in the west region on 14 December (*VOA* 16/12/2019).

The (AGovC) has also instituted a 6-day lockdown (6–11 February) in the area which would include a 24-hour restriction on movement, closure of schools, markets, and businesses. The lockdown has led to residents of the area stocking up on food, water and medical supplies.

The governing council also informed humanitarian organisations and diplomatic missions to suspend all activities in the Northwest and Southwest during the lockdown, signifying a deterioration of humanitarian access to displaced and vulnerable populations in these regions. Protection concerns have been raised for 4 million people affected by the crisis, including security of life and properties.

The deteriorating situation reflects the limited success of Switzerland's mediation efforts which began in June 2019 and was aimed at the granting of special status to the English-speaking regions by the Cameroonian parliament on 20 December 2019 (*VOA* 20/12/2019). The special status aimed at improving bilingualism and increased both the number of elected positions and the powers of elected officials in the English-speaking areas. Elected officials could now recruit workers into government institutions such as doctors and teachers.

### Map of Cameroon



Sources: International Crisis Group.

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## Presence of Government Troops

Apart from the presence of the Cameroonian military force Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR) troops of the Cameroonian military, the GoC has also sent in 350 gendarme officers to the Southwest and another 350 to the Northwest regions to ensure security before, during, and after the elections (*Journal du Cameroon* 10/01/2020). Troop presence is likely to agitate separatists who do not want the elections to take place.

## Anglophone Villagers Attacking Camps of Separatist Fighters

Villagers from Babungo, Balikumbat and other communities in the English-speaking regions are accusing separatist fighters of forcing them to contribute to the Ambazonian cause, and when they refuse, separatist fighters kill, loot and forcefully collect ransom from them (*VOA* 08/1/2020). In retaliation, villagers have attacked separatist camps, seizing their guns and taking back stolen items. Such occurrences may have dire consequences on arms proliferation in the area, elevating security risks for affected communities.

## Humanitarian needs

### Displacement

The breakdown of basic services in the Anglophone region has sparked the internal displacement of more than 679,000 people to Northwest, Southwest, West, and Littoral regions as well as over 51,000 people to Nigeria (*OCHA* 31/12/2019). An escalation in the crisis because of the upcoming elections is likely to reduce access to displaced populations both in Cameroon and in Nigeria. The warnings for humanitarian actors to halt operations is also a pointer to risk and impediments associated with delivering humanitarian assistance to the area.

### Health

The closure of over 40% of the health centres and the escalation of the crisis because of the elections is likely to intensify the deteriorating health conditions for the over 4 million people living in the English-speaking regions. Outbreaks of diseases such as cholera have already been recorded at the end of 2019 (*VOA* 29/22/2019; *Foreign Policy* 27/09/2019). Currently, there are 13 hospital beds per 10,000 population. Only 22.4% of children with diarrhoea are receiving treatment (*WHO* 10/2019). Existing health facilities complain of a lack of technical and medical personnel (*Foundation Merieux* 11/2019). The unavailability of medical personnel means that doctors and nurses from the BIR have had to help with dispensing health services (*MimiFoe* 26/11/2019).

## Livelihoods

Separatists regularly stage and enforce lockdowns in the English-speaking regions to protest decisions of the Cameroonian government and enforce these shutdowns with checkpoints to confirm compliance. These lockdowns have been known to go on for two weeks at a stretch, disrupting livelihoods and preventing public and private businesses from operating (*Foreign Policy* 27/09/2019).

## Education

80% of schools have been shut down and over 600,000 children have been forced out of school since the crisis began in 2017. Students are forced to stay at home as their school buildings were either burnt or converted to separatists' camps. Forced school boycotts are also enforced by separatists in the English-speaking areas (*Foreign Policy* 27/09/2019, *Guardian* 3/11/2019). These numbers are likely to increase with the escalation of the crisis in the election period as the 'back to school' campaign launched by the president has not encouraged school returns.

## Humanitarian and operational constraints

Increased violence in the English-speaking regions has hampered humanitarian operations for the over 679,000 people internally displaced in Northwest and Southwest regions (*UNHCR* 30/12/2019). The ban on humanitarian activities during the lockdown period is likely to escalate access constraints. The setting up of checkpoints by both the separatists and BIR is expected to hamper humanitarian logistical arrangements. The Cameroon government's attempt to play down the severity of the humanitarian conditions, and in some cases deny the existence of humanitarian needs, is likely to disrupt humanitarian activities in the Northwest and Southwest (*Journal du Cameroon* 30/12/2019).

## Aggravating factors

### Refugee returns

At the beginning of January 2020, the GoC concluded an arrangement with its Nigerian counterpart for the return of 700 repented separatists, refugees, and asylum seekers by the end of February 2020 (*AllAfrica* 03/01/2020). An escalation of the Anglophone crisis in this election period would halt the potential return of the over 51,000 Cameroonian refugees in Nigeria.

The complexities emerging from the proposed elections such as the kidnap of candidates and the presence of troops may also derail the amnesty and reintegration programmes proposed by the GoC and discourage separatist fighters from dropping their arms.