

Atrocity risks rise as violence escalates in Cameroon

How can the UK respond?

Briefing paper, 13 November 2018

Violence in Cameroon between government security forces and armed separatist groups has been escalating since 2016 and civilians are suffering the brutal consequences. The incidence of identity-based violence is rising and there is now an imminent risk of mass atrocity crimes occurring in the country.

The dire consequences of escalating identity-based violence are predictable —and in Cameroon are now being predicted. There have been repeated warnings from NGOs including Amnesty International, the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect and International Crisis Group of worsening human rights violations and an increasing risk of atrocity violence.

Past crises in the region and worldwide have shown that the failure to prioritise warning signs of mass violence only increases the likelihood of atrocities taking place and ensures that if the point of acute violence is reached fewer options for the UK and the international community remain on the policy-making table.

The UK shares in the collective responsibility to protect populations at risk of mass atrocity crimes wherever they may occur. This briefing sets out options for how the UK Government can respond to these warning signs and ensure British commitments to uphold this responsibility are fully met.

More than
3.3 million
people are in need of
humanitarian assistance

More than
460,000
people have been displaced
by the violence in the
Anglophone regions

More than
450
civilians have been killed
during the fighting

The road to the crisis

Anglophone communities in Cameroon have long faced marginalisation in a predominantly Francophone-governed country. Protests in late 2016 by Anglophone lawyers, teachers and students met with a violent response from government security forces, exacerbating tensions. During further protests in 2017, Anglophone separatists symbolically proclaimed an independent state of “Ambazonia” and security forces responded with disproportionate force. Since then, violence between government security forces and armed separatists in the Anglophone regions has continued to escalate.

Evidence of grave human rights violations committed in Cameroon is mounting. Government security forces have committed abuses including extra-judicial killings, the torture of suspected separatists, use of excessive force against protestors and burning down of homes. Armed separatists have also committed violations, including killings, kidnappings, and burning down of schools. The violence has led to mass displacement of civilians. Intercommunal tensions have worsened across Cameroon, with widespread use of hate speech in the media and online, and there are reports of incitement to violence along identity lines.

Elections in October saw the incumbent President, Paul Biya, re-elected for his seventh term amidst reports of violence on polling day, low voter turnout in the Anglophone regions, and allegations of electoral fraud. The post-election period so far has seen protests met with a harsh response from security forces, as well as continuing violence by separatist forces.

There are concerns that unchecked these tensions will drive further violence. If the violence between government and separatist forces continues, there is real risk of civil war in the Anglophone regions, exacerbated identity-based violence between communities, and/or the perpetration of mass atrocity crimes.

Upholding the UK's responsibility to protect in Cameroon

The UK has significant engagement in Cameroon, including through the British High Commission in Yaounde, FCO, DfID, DfIT, and the Commonwealth. Minister for Africa Harriett Baldwin has described the UK as a 'long-standing friend and Commonwealth partner' of Cameroon, and affirmed that the UK is 'active in promoting human rights in Cameroon'. The UK has expressed the urgent need to reduce the violence and for meaningful dialogue.

During this critical post-election period, the UK can lead in working to secure meaningful and inclusive dialogue between the Government of Cameroon and the Anglophone community. The UK has considerable experience in supporting mediation efforts: in 2018 the FCO announced £1.6 million to fund the Network of Women Mediators, training women across the Commonwealth to engage in mediation processes. In Cameroon, where mediated dialogue is urgently needed to reduce violence, the UK has the opportunity to use its many levers to encourage President Biya to engage in dialogue with the Anglophone community.

Important steps towards securing national dialogue can be made by supporting the upcoming Anglophone General Conference in Cameroon, organised by Cameroonian religious leaders and scheduled for 21-22 November. Additionally, while it is crucial to ensure that all actors take steps to calm tensions and reduce the violence, the international community must ensure that the Government of Cameroon upholds its obligations to protect human rights, and allows an OHCHR investigation to ensure accountability for those responsible for violations.

The UK can support the November conference and encourage national dialogue by:

- Using its influence at the UN, with partners, and in Cameroon, to seek public support from the Government of Cameroon for the conference, including releasing detained Anglophone activists and allowing members of the Anglophone diaspora to participate
- Using its influence with Anglophone separatists to urge their participation in the conference and engagement in a ceasefire
- Consider sanctions against individuals who commit violence or otherwise obstruct a process towards peace

A disconnected approach to atrocity prevention

The UK rightly continues to reaffirm commitments to the responsibility to protect populations from atrocity crimes and the Foreign Secretary has committed to 'do more' on atrocity prevention. However, as with recent UK policy towards mass violence in Yemen and Myanmar, so far UK Government responses to the red flags in Cameroon appear to lack consistency.

For example, earlier this year when facilitating the £1.5 billion natural gas project between a British company and the Government of Cameroon how did the Department for International Trade ensure the deal would not undermine HMG commitments to prevent and protect? Given the context of ongoing violence against the Anglophone community and the role that disagreements over natural resources can play in identity-based crises, did DfIT make an assessment of whether the deal was likely to mitigate or exacerbate the likelihood of violence?

The UK lacks a joined up public policy on atrocity prevention. The Foreign Affairs Committee recommended in September that HMG develop a cross-departmental approach to atrocity prevention. Such an approach would integrate prediction and prevention into and across decision-making from the development of policy on sanctions, to trade, humanitarian assistance, international development and diplomacy.

- There is a clear need for a joint analysis unit, cross-departmental mechanism, or special advisor within HMG tasked with applying an atrocity prevention lens to UK policy-making
- Creating a Ministerial portfolio for UK contributions to atrocity prevention would demonstrate HMG commitment to 'doing more' on this urgent agenda
- Resourcing the office of the UK Focal Point for the Responsibility to Protect with staff/advisors with specific expertise in atrocity prevention would match global best practice