

SPECIAL INTEREST TOPIC REPORT

THE AMBAZONIAN CRISIS IN CAMEROON AND IMPACT FOR NIGERIA



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20th January 2020

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Previously one of the more stable countries in West / Central Africa, Cameroon has, over the last decade, witnessed increasing conflict on two fronts:

- Overspill of the Boko Haram insurgency from Northeast Nigeria resulting in 2,000 deaths and the internal displacement of 250,000 that, over the last year, has intensified again after abating between 2017-18, with the insurgents killing hundreds of civilians and the Cameroonian military attacked in hit-and-run assaults akin to those seen in Borno State.
- What can rightly be termed the Ambazonian Crisis; a conflict that has a long history, but has, since 2016 resulted in between 2 and 3 thousand deaths, the internal displacement of at least 600,000 people and cross-border refugee movements of more than 50,000 Cameroonians to Southeastern Nigeria.

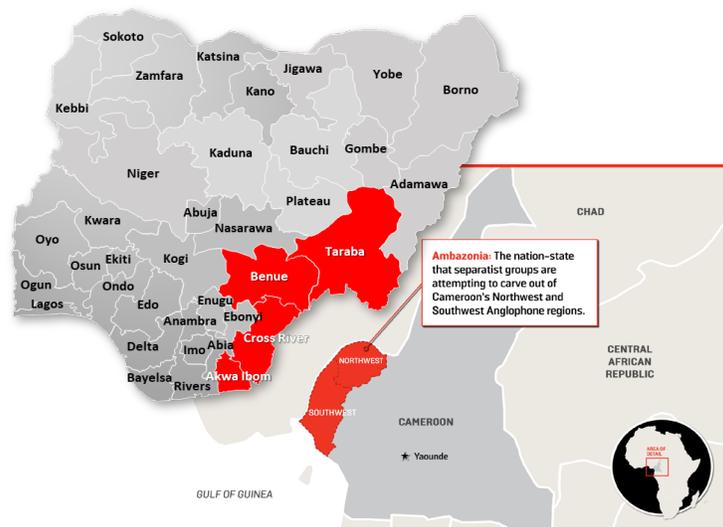
While the insurgency that began with Boko Haram and has drawn Nigeria and neighboring countries into the conflict, has figured prominently in our understanding of security risk in Nigeria, the Ambazonia Crisis is relatively less visible. And yet, in a part of Nigeria where security risk from ethnic militias, pirates, armed criminal gangs and those pursuing the Niger Delta emancipatory agenda is already present, the Ambazonia Crisis presents a significant additional de-stabilizing factor that IPs must be orientated to, monitor and prepared to respond to.

ORIGINS AND PATTERN OF CONFLICT IN THE AMBAZONIAN CRISIS

Ambazonia is the name chosen by secessionists within the English-speaking part of Southwestern Cameroon to refer to the sovereign nation they seek to create.

In the run-up to independence, residents of British-administered Southern Cameroon, which included the Northwest and Southwest regions, held a referendum in September 1961 under the auspices of the UN. The question was whether they wanted to belong to the newly Independent Federal Republic of Nigeria or to French-administered Cameroon. Under promises of a

Figure 1: Ambazonia - Location within Cameroon and in relation to Contiguous States in Nigeria (mapping incorporates that from the Council on Foreign Relations)



federal state and English as the official language, and fearing domination by the Igbos of Southeast Nigeria,¹ English-speaking Southern Cameroon joined the majority French-speaking East. Despite the agreement stating otherwise, Cameroon became a unitary state in 1972. The English-speaking part of Cameroon has since considered themselves an oppressed minority, and the preconditions for militant Ambazonian secessionism were created.

In October 2016, lawyers and teachers started demonstrating peacefully in response to the use of French in Anglophone schools, the appointment of Francophone judges and the attempts to replace the English tradition of Common Law with the French Civil Law tradition. Schools were closed and 'Ghost Town' strikes started – for several days each week, shops and institutions closed their doors. The government responded by shutting down the internet, arresting and intimidating protestors. In October 2017, separatists declared an independent state, which they named Ambazonia. The government sent in forces, and large-scale fighting broke out sparking widespread internal displacement and cross-border movement of refugees into Nigeria.

Since that time, sectarian violence between secessionists and others, and an insurgency mounted by the various Ambazonian fighter groups against the Cameroonian military has continued, leading to as many as 3,000 deaths. All sides are accused of brutality² and there appears little hope that a negotiated, peaceful settlement can be reached in the near term for two major reasons:

- The widely touted National Dialogue initiated by Paul Biya's government was boycotted by many of the secessionists and they have rejected the outcome of the dialogue. Their demands have hardened through the struggle, and many will only accept the formation of an independent state, with Ivo Tapang, a spokesperson for the Contender Forces of Ambazonia remarking, "We want independence and nothing else." Tapang reinforced this by stating, "We will not accept an olive branch from someone whose troops are still in our territory... We will intensify our struggle with guns and bullets."
- Secessionists state that at least 5,000 political prisoners are being held by the Yaoundé government and a pre-condition of any engagement in dialogue would be their release. While the National Dialogue concluded with the concession that proceedings against 333 would be discontinued, this does not get close to the number currently imprisoned, and it specifically does not include the 10 leaders arrested in and extradited from Nigeria, who were sentenced in August to life in prison on terrorism charges.

¹ In May 2017, there was a meeting between representatives of the Independent Peoples of Biafra (IPOB) and the Ambazonian "Government" in Washington D.C. There were no common grounds as the distrust of the Igbo was what led to the choice of joining the French Cameroon in the first place. This indicates there is little likelihood of the 2 separatist organizations ever working together.

² Human Rights Watch have accused the security forces of committing "brazen crimes" against the citizens, including unlawful killings and use of excessive force. Between October 2019 and Mar 2019 alone, the Cameroonian military were accused of killing at least 170 non-combatant civilians, torching villages, and forcing thousands to flee their homes. The HRW report also noted, however, that secessionists have also attacked civilian targets and Amnesty International later in 2019 confirmed the veracity of a video where Ambazonian fighters beheaded a member of the security forces they had earlier kidnapped. **It is also notable that, in December 2019, the first humanitarian to die in the conflict was confirmed when Ambazonian separatists abducted and killed an aid worker in Donga Mantung, close to the border with Taraba State, Nigeria. A field worker with COMINSUD, a local NGO and UN partner, he was abducted and later killed while carrying out a humanitarian needs assessment.**

NIGERIA'S INVOLVEMENT

Nigeria as the closest Anglophone neighbor to Cameroon finds itself involved in the Ambazonian Crisis in three main ways:

- The Nigerian government considers itself an ally of Cameroon. In January 2018, 12 Ambazonian leaders and 34 others, including the President elect of Ambazonia, Sisiku Julius Ayuk Tabe, were arrested by Nigerian security operatives during a meeting at the NERA Hotel in Abuja, and 10 of the leaders, including Tabe, deported to Cameroon, where they have since been tried by a Military Tribunal and are currently serving life prison terms on charges of terrorism and secession. While their deportation has subsequently been ruled illegal by a Nigerian court in March this year, there is little to no prospect of Yaoundé agreeing to their return to Nigerian soil, and it is also evident that, while the judicial branch of the government have one view, the executive branch are decidedly hostile or unsympathetic to the separatists.
- As the nearest neighbor to Ambazonia, the Crisis has sparked large scale refugee movements into Nigeria (see Refugee Movement below). Many of the refugees move through the Takamanda National Park, and these routes have become vital arteries in addition for both the separatists seeking refuge from Cameroonian forces and economically. Everyone and everything, from cocoa and refugees displaced by the conflict to weapons and ammunition now pass along these tracks. The conflict has also triggered an exodus of the significant Nigerian business community from this region of Cameroon, as well as Nigerian traders who used to run key markets.
- For cultural reasons, many Nigerians are sympathetic to the plight of English-speaking Cameroonians. There are close ethno-cultural links between the people of the border communities of both nations. For several years, Nigerian fishermen, traders and farmers have settled in the border communities on the Cameroonian side. This cultural link coupled with porous borders and semi-formal trade means Cameroonians are frequently easily integrated into any community on the Nigerian side of the border and are often welcome.

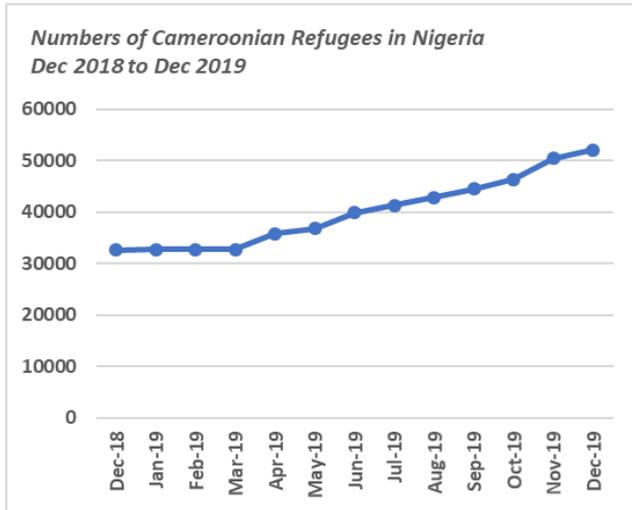
Simply put, the Nigerian Government is hostile to the separatists while the Nigerian people are sympathetic to their cause, and this sympathy is most pronounced in the border communities.

There is also talk of Nigerians fighting for separatists as mercenaries and other involvement in the fighting in Cameroon. Marshall Foncha, the chairman of the Ambazonia Military Council, the political wing of the Ambazonian Military Forces (AMF – the largest of the groups of fighters), said he has attempted to source arms from two foreign powers in a deal that is being mediated by sympathetic officers in the Nigerian Army. Furthermore, there is magazine article that cites off-duty soldiers from the Nigerian Army who had trained with AMF fighters in the country's Southwest saying that rebels frequently cross into Nigeria to purchase weapons and other supplies for themselves.

REFUGEE MOVEMENT

Nigeria's own insecurity has led to the internal displacement of some 2 million people within its own borders. However, the porous nature of its nearly 5,000 kilometers of land borders and proximity to conflicts in other West African nations has also resulted in cross-border refugee movements. Of these, Cameroonians account for over 96% of refugees, and these numbers have nearly doubled in the last 9 months to over 52,000.

Data Presentation 1: Trend [Cumulative] Registrations of Cameroonian Refugees in Nigeria, December 2018 to December 2019, and Comparison of Country of Origin of all Refugees in Nigeria (Source: UNHCR and Nigerian Government (NCRMIDP))

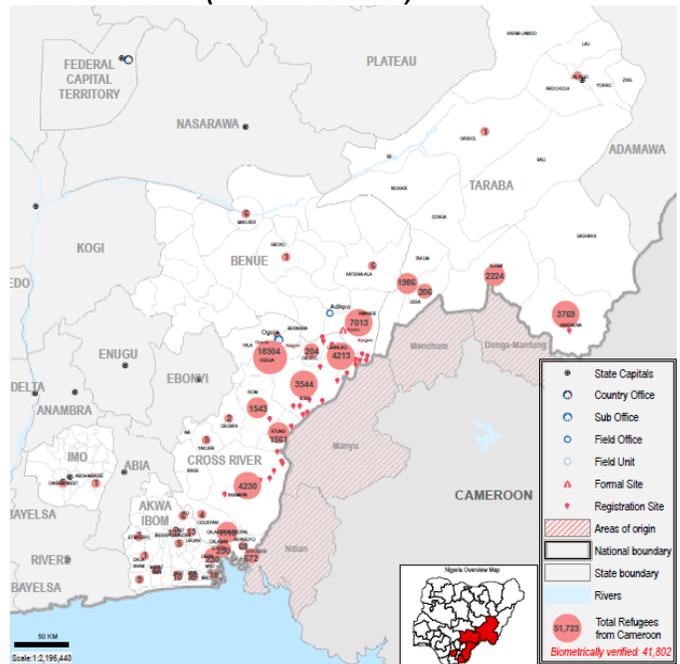


REFUGEE NUMBERS IN NIGERIA AS AT 31 DEC 2019	
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN	NUMBER
Cameroon	52,066
Democratic Republic of Congo	635
Central African Republic	460
Others	335
Syrian Arab Rep.	263
Mali	144
Côte d'Ivoire	128
Chad	88
Sudan	47

The largest concentration of refugees (nearly 75%) is in Cross River State (including in Calabar, the State capital), with others scattered across Akwa Ibom, Benue, Taraba, and Imo States³. While the conflict remains ongoing, limited returns (single figure hundreds) have been possible and, by some estimates, perhaps as many as 5,000 refugees have acquired Nigerian identification documents and have been assimilated, in many cases where pre-existing ties existed.

The refugee population is assessed as likely to continue to grow, not least as the socio-economic conditions for a return will lag behind any peace settlement if one were to be reached, UNICEF estimating in June 2019 that, at that time, 1.3 million people in the Anglophone regions needed humanitarian aid, and many of the communities from which people had fled destroyed in, what in some

Figure 2: Cameroonian Refugees in Nigeria as at December 2019 (Source: UNHCR)



³ The major refugee camps are located in Okende and Adagom communities, both in Ogoja LGA, Cross River State, and in Ikyogen in Kwande LGA, Benue State.

areas, seems to have been a scorched earth approach adopted by the Cameroonian military.

SECURITY RISK IMPLICATIONS FOR NIGERIA

The security risk implications associated with the Ambazonian crisis described here are based on professional analysis and augmented through in-depth discussion with the Commander of the Nigerian Army's 13 Brigade, based in Calabar (Brigadier General Olatoye) and USAID IPs operating in the border States.

As the number of refugees continues to grow, so pressure on already strained local resources will grow, and instances of resentment where humanitarian aid is being delivered to refugee camps where the local population have little, may – as they have elsewhere in Nigeria – lead to localized conflict, civil unrest and intimidation of refugees, creating risk by proximity to IPs working with the refugee population.

Notwithstanding the current acceptance of refugee populations in the states bordering Cameroon, the assessment is that the border is not secure. The Nigerian Army have established four Forward Operating Bases along the frontier zone, whose role is not only to disrupt the cross-border movement of armed Ambazonian secessionists, but also deter incursions by Cameroonian state forces pursuing armed groups into Nigerian territory, which have occurred relatively frequently. The 13 Brigade Commander stated that, as an example of the continuing insecurity in the area, the day before the meeting with the PLSO team [on 24th November 2019], four Ambazonians were arrested with quantities of 7.62mm [rifle and machine gun] ammunition and were handed over to the State Security Service and a kidnapping gang was recently arrested.

There are about 20-armed secessionist groups, including the Ambazonia Defense Forces (ADF), AMF, the Tigers, and the Amba Boys and the likelihood all would simultaneously agree to the terms of any peace deal and lay down their weapons is low. Where groups came under increased pressure, the likelihood that they would use Nigeria as a safe haven, and be pursued by the Cameroonian military will increase, escalating insecurity in Nigeria, even as any conflict in Cameroon itself was perceived to be declining. In addition:

- Nigerians fighting as mercenaries with the separatists are a security risk were returning with their weapons.
- Many criminal gangs in the border states of Cameroon have rebranded themselves as freedom fighters but continue to carry out armed robberies and kidnapping for ransom. Kidnapping for ransom is already a thriving lucrative crime in Nigeria, unlike in Cameroon, where “the pickings are small”. This may attract some of the Southern Cameroonian gangs to ply their trade in Nigeria.

SUMMARY REMARKS

The main security risk of the Ambazonian separatist war in Cameroon to Nigeria is thus a potential increase in crime and potentially conflict associated with tension between local Indigenous populations and refugee populations. Isolated instances where 3rd parties – including IPs – are ‘caught in the crossfire’ between Nigerian and Cameroonian military forces and Ambazonian secessionists is also a credible threat.

The evolution of this conflict is one that should be closely tracked by IPs to enable early decision-making on planned project activity, location, and tempo to be made where the risk environment is deteriorating.