Cameroon Country Briefing

January 2024

Produced by: Sam Flood

Purpose: The country briefings are designed to provide an initial overview of Dallaire Institute countries of focus – drawing on emerging trends related to peace and security, gender, children's rights, and recruitment and use. Paired with the Policy Alignment Tool and the Capacity Building Assessment Tool, the purpose of the country briefings is to support Dallaire Institute staff in understanding and assessing the situation on the ground, particularly as it relates to children, to inform research, advocacy and programmatic work. This report on Cameroon will allow the Dallaire Institute to remain informed when advocating for the implementation of the Vancouver Principles as part of the *Advancing the Vancouver Principles in Africa* project in seven sub-Saharan African countries.

This briefing is divided into the following sections:

1. Country and Operational Context
2. Security Sector Approach
3. Children, Peace and Security Context
4. Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers Context
5. Special Topics Section
    a. 2025 Presidental Election & electoral violence

Country Context

- In nine out of ten regions, Cameroon currently faces three major humanitarian crises, the Lake Chad basin conflict, the North-West and SouthWest (NWSW) crisis/Anglophone separatist crisis and the Central African Republic (CAR) refugee crisis, contributing to the country's high degree of political, military and economic instability.
- One out of six people in Cameroon (4.7 million) need humanitarian assistance.
- State security forces are unable to address these conflicts and fully and protect Cameroonians.
    - Leaving rural communities more vulnerable to attacks from terrorist groups, including kidnapping, murder, arson, extortion, destruction of physical property.
- Cameroon has consistently denied the severity of the crisis and has yet to take any meaningful action aimed at ending the conflict or addressing its root causes. (globalr2p, 2024)

Political/Social context

- **President Paul Biya** of the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement has governed Cameroon since 1982 in what is called an "electoral authoritarian", one party regime by many.
    - Despite his unpopularity, he maintains power by actively targeting political opponents while using legal orders and state violence to quell public debate.
    - Biya secured another presidential term in 2018 with 71 per cent of the vote in a process characterized by low turnout and a lack of genuine democratic competition. The CPDM has also been accused of vote-buying and intimidating opposition. (Freedom House, 2024)
- British and French colonial rule divided the country into Francophone and Anglophone (a small area in the North-West and South-West) majority regions.
    - The "Ambazonian" separatist movement has sprung partially from colonial impacts
- Cameroon is considered "not free" by Freedom House, ranking low on press freedom as journalists face violence, kidnappings and even murder especially when covering issues relating to government corruption. (Freedom house, 2023)
    - The National Communication Council (CNC), a media regulatory body, has a history of harassing journalists and the State-run Cameroon Radio Television (CRTV) has been criticized for favoring the CPDM in its coverage.
    - Acedemic freedom is also low, university professors and students are frequently surveilled and targeted.
- Corruption is systemic and bribery is commonplace in all sectors, despite anticorruption initiatives and the presence of the National Anticorruption Commission (CONAC). (Freedom House, 2023)

Economic context

- Cameroon emerged from the COVID-19 crisis with stable macroeconomic indicators, relying on increased oil revenues and international aid.
- Most Cameroonians are living in poverty
- Cameroon was a recipient of the World Bank's SAP program in the 1980s following a severe economic crisis, reforming their banking sector, privatizing government and liberalizing trade.
    - This reform was considered too slow by the Work Bank and the country was considered "one of the most disappointing adjusters" to SAP by the World Bank. (BTI, 2024)
    - In 1999, Cameroon was recognized as a heavily indebted poor country (HIPC) by the IMF, alleviating some debt.

Conflict

- Beginning in northeast Nigeria with the emergence of extremist group Boko Haram in July of 2009, the **Lake Chad basin conflict** between state military forces and non-state armed groups has expanded to neighboring countries including the Far North region of Cameroon.
    - Since December 2020, the Far North, Cameroon's poorest, least educated and most isolated region, has increasingly become the epicenter of Boko Haram's violence, targeting civilians. (HRW 2021)
    - In 2016, the conflict had already caused 1,500 deaths and led to 155,000 displaced persons and 73,000 refugees. (international crisis group, 2016)
    - The group has particularly gathered support among disaffected youth in districts adjacent to Nigeria through ideological indoctrination, socio-economic incentives and coercion. (Int. Crisis group, 2016)
- Anglophone separatists, a group made up of English-speaking lawyers, students and teachers first peaceful protested their cultural marginalization by Cameroon's francophone government in 2016. They were met by government security forces with a violent crackdown, resulting in Cameroon's most pressing violent conflict, the **North-West and South-West (NWSW) Crisis,** also known as the **Anglophone separatist/Ambazonian crisis**
    - Violent conflict between the newly formed armed wing of the separatists and Cameroonian security forces has resulted in several atrocities against civilians and children.
    - It is estimated that 6,000 people have been killed since 2016, actual numbers are expected to be higher. (globalr2p, 2024)
    - 638, 000 people in this region have been internally displaced because of this conflict. (UNICEF, 2023).
        - Almost 70,000 Cameroonians have sought refuge in neighboring Nigeria. (European Commision, 2024)
    - In October 2017, a new independent state, "Ambazonia" was declared by separatists, it is not recognized by the Cameroonian government.
    - State security forces have perpetrated extrajudicial killings and widespread sexual and gender-based violence, burned Anglophone villages and subjected individuals with suspected separatist ties to arbitrary detention, torture and ill-treatment (globalr2p, 2024).
- In 2013, an outbreak of civil war between several armed groups, stemming from now dissolved majority Muslim Séléka group and Christian "anti-balaka" militias in Central African Republic (CAR) forced more than 20,000 people to flee neighboring Cameroon, marking the beginnings of the **Central African Republic refugee crisis.**
    - This crisis is ongoing, in 2020, Seleka and anti-balaka groups joined together to create the Patriots for Change (CPC), a united coalition to resist the CAR government.

        - Some armed groups have been disbanded; however threats still remain. (CFR, 2024)
    - Most refugees to Cameroon are Muslim women and children, who fled because of their perceived sympathy for the largely Muslim Seleka (crisisgroup, 2024)
    - Many CAR refugees now live in refugee camps near the border.

Security Sector Approach

State Forces

Cameroon's military has struggled to maintain a monopoly of force in both the Anglophone crisis and Chad Lake Basin conflict. Civilians are regularly targeted by state forces and the many state-sponsored vigilante groups, leading to a very low level of trust in the government and state military.

- President Biya is the commander-in-chief of all military units (military, police and Gendarmerie) and appoints the bulk of the senior officer core. (BTI, 2024)
- Cameroon is a member of the Multi Joint Task Force (MNJFT), established by the African Union in 2014 to combat Boko Haram. Benin, Chad, Niger and Nigeria are also members of the MNJFT and receive support from the U.S., EU, France and the U.K.
- In fighting Boko Haram to the north, the Cameroonian miliary has committed atrocities and grave violations against children including extrajudicial executions, arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, incommunicado detention, systematic torture, and forced return of refugees. (HRW, 2021)
    - In the early summer of 2022, troops killed 10 civilians, "burned 12 homes, destroyed, and looted health facilities, arbitrarily detained at least 26 people, and are presumed to have forcibly disappeared up to 17 others." (VOA africa, 2022)
    - The United Nations verified the military use of 21 schools by the Cameroon Armed Forces in the Far-North for one year. Four schools continued to be used as of December 2021. (UN 2022)
- Cameroon's Rapid Intervention Brigade/Battalion (BIR), which was created to fight Boko Haram, received US military support, including a train-and-assist program. (Chicago Council on Global affairs, 2023)
    - The BIR is considered elite" army-within-an-army,", with 5,000 members who report direct to Biya.
    - The BIR has been accused of several atrocities including torture and murder of civilians.
- An Amnesty International report from 2017 documented that government forces arbitrarily detained, tortured, and extrajudicially killed 101 Cameroonians from March 2013 to March 2017. (Global affairs, 2023)

    - Most of the victims were military-age men, but numerous victims were women or children
    - The report alleges that Cameroonian forces conducted torture at a base where US forces were present.
- Similar accusations of crimes committed by state force have arisen in the Anglophone crisis
    - HRW has reported that "instead of protecting the population from threats posed by armed groups, the Cameroonian security forces have committed serious violations against civilians, causing many to flee their homes". (HRW, 2022)

Boko Haram

- Since 2009, the jihadist group Boko Haram has operated along the Cameroonian Nigerian border in the Extreme North Region. Although the conflict has subsided from its peak in 2013/14, it has taken a significant toll.
    - Boko Haram regularly attacks villages and civilians in Cameroon's North, using suicide bombers, taking hostages, looting homes,
    - Unidentified Boko Haram-affiliated and splinter groups recruit and use boys as young as 10 years old to act as spies.
- There are numerous self-defense vigilante groups fighting against Boko-Haram with approximately 14,000 members who face criticism for their involvement in criminal activities such as cattle stealing, smuggling, and banditry. (BTI, 2024)
- According to a November 2020 report of the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, a United States Department of Defense think tank, the number of Boko Haram attacks against civilians in Cameroon in 2020 was higher than in Nigeria, Niger, and Chad combined (africacenter, 2020)

Anglophone separatists/Ambazonian groups

- Several armed, warlord groups aligning themselves with Anglophone independence have emerged since the beginning of the conflict, referred to as "Amba Boys".
    - These groups were popular amongst many in the region who sought independence from Cameroon.
    - However, experts have noticed a drop in this enthusiasm, leading to a drop in funding for the Amba Boys.
        - Alternative, often violent forms of fundraising are commonplace including abductions for ransom, the looting of property, the sale of illicit fuel, and roadblocks. (ACLED, 2024)
    - ACLED reports that as civilians are increasingly more targeted, "separatist interests appear to be moving away from the independence of the region and towards self-preservation through more localized interests and engagement in illicit economic activity".

- The most common source of arms for separatists has been Nigeria from clandestine organized crime networks across the Sahel.
- As the separatist movement fragments over time, several ethnic and village militas have cropped up

Table Two: Overview of Security Actors in Cameroon

Key Questions	Yes/ No	Additional Details
Is there an active peace support mission (i.e., UN or AU)?	No	UN peacekeepers have operated in CAR, via the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) since 2014. Cameroon has deployed 760 military personal and 348 police personnel to the region through the UN
Are there other countries presently engaged in the conflict?	No	No countries, only non-state armed groups. Cameroon collaborates with other states to combat Boko Haram through the MNJFT

Children Peace and Security Context

- As reported by the UN department for Children and Armed Conflict, 174 grave violations against 129 children have been committed by Boko Haram and their many splinter groups, the Cameroon Armed Forces and groups in the South-West & North-West. (UN, 2022)
    - Boko Haram and affiliated groups:
        - 44 children have been killed and 31 have been maimed.
        - 3 boys, as young as ten were used as spies and errand runners 55 children have been abducted, many from schools.
        - 18 schools have been attacked or used in combat. 55 children have been abducted.
            - 12 children were rescued or released, 7 remain in captivity, 3 were arrested by the Cameroon Armed Forces, while the status of 33 is unknown
    - The Cameroonian Armed Forces:
        - 14 children were killed or maimed.

        - 5 children (2 boys, 3 girls) were detained for alleged association with armed groups.
        - 21 schools in the Far North have used as military bases by the Cameroon Armed Forces.
    - Armed groups, often separatists in the South-West & North-West:
        - 14 children have been killed in the South-West and 12 have been killed in the North-West
        - 19 schools were targeted (burning and looting) as separatists threaten and abduct students and teachers
            - Separatists have banned government education, as a result more than 80% of schools were reported as closed by the Global Protection Cluster (cpaor, 2019)

Youth in conflict resolution

- Cameroon has taken some steps to include youth and children in their approach to conflict with Boko Haram, as reported in a study made in collaboration with the Dallaire Insitute and Local Youth Corner Cameroon. (LOYOC & Dallaire, 2024)
    - In 2009, Cameroon established a National Youth Council to promote youth ownership, participation, and leadership in sustainable development through youth-led civil society organizations.
    - The country enhanced this framework by creating a Youth, Peace, and Security Council within the national youth association movement
    - Cameroon became the first country to establish a national Youth Mediator's Network, inspired by Resolution 2419, which follows UNSCR 2250
- However, when addressing the Anglophone conflict, Camerron did not significantly include young people in the Major National Dialogue on the issue. (LOYOC & Dallaire, 2024)
- Children make up almost half the population of residents at deradicalization/transition centers aimed at disarming and demobilizing armed group fighters. (IOM, 2023)
    - 1,408 children live in the three DDR Centers in the North-West, South-West and Far-North Regions of Cameroon.
    - 1,189 children were registered at the Meri Center.

Table Two: Child Protection Mechanisms in Cameroon

What is the status of the following child protection mechanisms in-country?	Supported by the state (Y/N/ NA)	Additional Details

UN Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) on the six grave violations against children		
Paris Principles	Yes	Endorsed in 2011
OPAC	Yes	Signed 5 Oct 2001, Ratified 4 Feb 2013
Convention on the Rights of the Child	Yes	Signed October 27, 1990, and ratified on January 11, 1993
Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict	Yes	Signed 2001, Ratification/Accession in 2013
Vancouver Principles	Yes	As of May 2023
Safe Schools Declaration	Yes	Endorsed in 2018

Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers Context

- According to the U.S. State Department, Cameroonian government security forces allegedly recruited and used a child in 2019 to gather intelligence in the country's Anglophone regions. (Stimson, 2024)

- In 2024, the U.S. State Department identified the recruitment and use of child soldiers, including children younger than the age of 15, in support roles by the Cameroonian Armed Forces
    - Over the course of the 2024 Trafficking in Persons Report period (1 April 2023 through 31 March 2024), the government of Cameroon, in partnership with the UN, made some progress on a handover protocol for the transfer of child soldiers to protection actors and trained security forces on child soldier-related issues and reporting procedures (Stimson, 2024)
- Anglophone separatists regularly recruit children.
    - Numerous violent incidents reported by civilians interviewed by the Global Protection Cluster described the perpetrators as "boys", all episodes involving alarming levels of violence. (CPAOR, 2019)
- Boko Haram regularly recruits children as spies and fighters.
    - In 2020, HRW reported that Boko Haram militants used child suicide bombers in an early August attack on a site for displaced people in northern Cameroon, killing at least 17 civilians. (HRW, 2020)

Special Topics

2025 Presidental Election

- A presidential election is scheduled in Cameroon for October 2025. The Africa Centre for Strategic Studies has called a transfer of power "inevitable" (africacentre, 2025)
    - Though Biya who will be 92 by the time of the election, has maintained power over Cameroonian politics since 1982 with control over all government institutions, including the electoral commission and judiciary, there remains hope that this electoral cycle will be different as opposition groups mobilize a united front.
- Legislative and municipal elections were set to take place this year, however Lawmakers in Biya's party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) voted in favour of the bill extending their term by one year, until March 2026. (africacentre, 2025)
- Biya's government has passed countless laws to quell opposition. (BTI, 2024)
    - Operation Sparrowhawk, a large-scale anticorruption campaign, was used to target Biya's political opponents.
    - In 2014, a broad anti-terror law was passed, granting the regime extensive discretion in defining crimes against Biya.
    - In 2008, the National Assembly abolished presidential term limits, resulting in major protests and state violence.

- 30 parties under Cameroon's notoriously fractious opposition have agreed to coalesce around Maurice Kamto as head of the Alliance politique pour le changement (APC) coalition.
    - His platform includes a campaign of extending health and education services and reducing inequity.
    - In March of 2024, the APC was deemed "illegal" and "clandestine" by Biya's territorial administration minister, Paul Atanga Nji. (HRW, 2024)
- Maurice Kamto and the Movement for the Renaissance of Cameroon (Mouvement pour la renaissance du Cameroun, MRC), were Biya's main challenger in the 2018 electoral cycle.
    - They officially garnered 14 percent of the votes.
    - Kamto and over 200 of his supporters were arrested for protesting the 2018 presidential polls. He was released after 10 months, however 41 of his supporters remain behind bars after being sentenced to 7 years in prison. (Africa Centre, 2025)
- After the 2018 election, Biya's government responded with a heavy and violent crackdown to opposition-led protests across the country (HRW, 2025), this is expected to

References

Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (December 2024) *Cameroon.* tps://www.globalr2p.org/countries/cameroon/

BTI (2024) *Cameroon Country Report* https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard/CMR

UNICEF. (June 2024) *Advocacy Note for the Humanitarian WASH Response North-West and South-West* https://reliefweb.int/report/cameroon/advocacy-note-humanitarian-wash-response-north-west-and-south-west-june-2023 _gl=1*ulkc74*_ga*MTE1NjY5Njc1MC4xNzM3NDg3NTc5*_ga_E60ZNX2F68*MTczNzQ4NzU3OC4xLjAuMTczNzQ4NzU3OC42MC4wLjA.

Human Rights Watch (2021) *Cameroon: Boko Haram Attacks Escalate in Far North* https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/04/05/cameroon-boko-haram-attacks-escalate-far-north

Freedom House (2023) *Freedom in the World 2023: Cameroon* https://freedomhouse.org/country/cameroon/freedom-world/2024

International Crisis Group (2016) *Cameroon: Confronting Boko Haram* https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon/cameroon-confronting-boko-haram

International Crisis Group (2024) *Latest Updates: Central African Republic* https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/central-african-republic

Council on Foreign Relations (July 2024) *Conflict in the Central African Republic* https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violence-central-african-republic

European Commision (November 2024) *Cameroon* https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/where/africa/cameroon_en

Africa Center for Security Studies (November 2020) *Boko Haram Violence against Civilians Spiking in Northern Cameroon* https://africacenter.org/spotlight/boko-haram-violence-against-civilians-spiking-in-northern-cameroon/

Africa Center for Security Studies (January 2025) *Cameroon: Change is Coming but More of the Same?* https://africacenter.org/spotlight/2025-elections/cameroon/

Chicago Council for Foreign Affairs (August 2023) Cameroon: Which War Are We Fighting https://globalaffairs.org/research/policy-brief/cameroon-which-war-are-we-fighting

Amnesty International (July 2017) *Cameroon's secret torture chambers: Human rights violations and war crimes in the fight against Boko Haram* https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr17/6536/2017/en/

Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (October 2024) *Q&A: The evolution of Ambazonian separatist groups in Anglophone Cameroo*n https://acleddata.com/2024/10/11/qa-the-evolution-of-ambazonian-separatist-groups-in-anglophone-cameroon/

International Organization for Migration (November 2023) *Disarmament and reintegration: Cameroon has made the protection of children in the context of DDR a priority.* https://www.iom.int/news/disarmament-and-reintegration-cameroon-has-made-protection-children-context-ddr-priority

Child Protection Area of Responsibility (April 2019) *Risks and Needs for Child Protection in Cameroon – North West and South West Crisis* https://cpaor.net/sites/default/files/2020-04/swnw_cameroon_sdr_2019_final_.pdf)

Human Rights Watch (August 2020) Cameroon: *Boko Haram Suicide Bombers Strike Displacement Site* https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/08/25/cameroon-boko-haram-suicide-bombers-strike-displacement-site

Nsaizdezde, Sakah Bernard (August 2024) "Baseline Study for the project Promoting Youth Participation in the Peace Process in the North West and South West Regions of Cameroon" *Dallaire Insitute & Local Youth Corner Cameroon*

Henry L. Stimson Center (December 2024) *CSPA Implementation Tracker: Cameroon* https://www.stimson.org/project/child-soldiers/cspa-implementation-tracker/country-profiles/cameroon/

UN Children & Armed Conflict (July 2022) *Cameroon* *https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/where-we-work/cameroon/*