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Cameroon: Key Issues and U.S. Policy

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SUMMARY

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Cameroon: Key Issues and U.S. Policy

Overview. Congressional interest in Cameroon has grown since 2017, when separatists claiming to represent the Anglophone minority in largely French-speaking Cameroon launched a rebellion against the government. Activism by Cameroonians living abroad has helped draw international attention to that conflict, including from some Members of Congress representing constituencies with Cameroonian diaspora communities. Human rights abuses by Cameroonian security forces in the course of the Anglophone conflict have raised challenges for U.S.-Cameroon security cooperation, which is primarily focused on efforts to combat the Nigerian-origin Boko Haram and an Islamic State-affiliated splinter faction, the Islamic State West Africa Province (IS-WA), which are active in northern Cameroon. The United States has restricted some security assistance for Cameroon due to human rights concerns, though some counterterrorism programs and other assistance continue.

People and Politics. Cameroon is a diverse, resource-rich country of 28.5 million people. Formed through a merger of two separately colonized entities—one administered by France, one by England—Cameroon is largely French-speaking, with a minority population of English-speakers concentrated in the west. Perceived marginalization among Anglophones has long provoked demands for political decentralization as well as calls from some activists for the independence of the English-speaking regions. Cameroon is predominately Christian; Muslims comprise an estimated 20% of the population and are concentrated in the north, which is generally poorer and less economically developed than the south.

President Paul Biya, age 88, is Africa's oldest head of state and one of its longest-serving leaders. He won reelection to another seven-year term in 2018 and has no clear successor. His administration has long restricted freedoms of speech and assembly, and the government arguably has used the conflicts in the north and west as a pretext to bring terrorism- and separatism-related charges against journalists, activists, and opponents. His administration has initiated some decentralization measures, which many analysts view as necessary to resolve the Anglophone conflict and other challenges. Observers have questioned the pace and sufficiency of such measures and the government's commitment to meaningful reform.

Security and Humanitarian Conditions. In the past decade, Cameroon's reputation for stability under President Biya has dissipated with the emergence of security crises on several fronts. Boko Haram began operating more openly in northern Cameroon around 2013, and attacks by Boko Haram and IS-WA (which split from Boko Haram in 2016) persist. In the west, the conflict between Anglophone separatists and state security forces has featured widespread abuses against civilians, while efforts to negotiate a peaceful settlement have foundered. Together, the conflicts in the north and west have displaced over one million Cameroonians internally. Cameroon also hosts nearly 330,000 refugees fleeing insecurity in neighboring Central African Republic, and 120,000 Nigerians displaced by the Boko Haram and IS-WA insurgencies, according to U.N. agencies.

Economy. A collapse in global oil prices and Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic-related shocks caused Cameroon's economy to contract by -2.8% in 2020, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Economic growth relies heavily on commodity exports, notably of crude oil and petroleum products, agricultural products, timber, and aluminum. Cameroon ranked 153 out of 189 countries on the 2020 U.N. Human Development Index, above many African countries, but roughly a quarter of the population lives below the international poverty line of $1.90 per day. Conflict in the Anglophone regions, a hub for farming and rubber cultivation, has impeded agricultural activity. State-owned enterprises are prominent in major sectors; several have faced allegations of corruption and mismanagement. Public debt is a key challenge.

COVID-19. Consistent with regional trends, Cameroon has recorded fewer COVID-19 cases per capita than many non-African countries, though it also has administered comparatively fewer tests on a per capita basis. Limited vaccine supply and local vaccine hesitancy have reportedly stymied vaccination efforts. Reports that the government misappropriated COVID-19 response funds, including IMF loans, gave rise to a state investigation in 2021 that has implicated several ministries.

U.S. Assistance. According to public budget materials, State Department and USAID-administered assistance for Cameroon included $66.2 million in FY2020 appropriations. Health programs comprised over 90%; the balance included funds for civil society strengthening and other governance programs ($4.0 million) and military professionalization ($800,000). These figures exclude emergency humanitarian aid, which public budget documents do not disaggregate by country. They similarly do not include State Department-administered security assistance allocated on a regional or global basis, the main vehicles through which Cameroon has received U.S. military training and equipment to strengthen counterterrorism, peacekeeping, and maritime security capacities. The Department of Defense has provided additional security assistance to Cameroon.

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Overview

Cameroon is an ethno-linguistically diverse, resource-rich Central African country of 28.5 million people bordering the Gulf of Guinea. In the past decade, its reputation for general stability under authoritarian president Paul Biya—Africa's oldest head of state, and one of its longest-serving—has dissipated with the emergence of governance and security crises on several fronts. In the north, attacks by the Nigerian-origin Boko Haram as well as the Islamic State West Africa Province (IS-WA) have increased since 2018. In the west, violence between government forces and separatists claiming to represent Cameroon's Anglophone minority has spurred concerns over Cameroon's territorial integrity and the viability of President Biya's centralized governance system. State security forces have been implicated in extensive abuses in both conflicts.

President Biya won reelection to a seventh term in a 2018 election marred by violence, low turnout, and administrative irregularities. His top challenger in that election spent months in prison after contesting the vote result. Biya has no clear successor, prompting concerns of potential political instability should he die or become incapacitated in office.

With the Boko Haram/IS-WA conflict's expansion from northeast Nigeria into northern Cameroon in 2013-2014, U.S.-Cameroon relations increasingly emphasized counterterrorism cooperation. U.S. security assistance for Cameroon increased, and U.S. military forces deployed there to conduct regional intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance operations. Reported human rights abuses by Cameroonian security personnel have created challenges for bilateral ties, prompting restrictions on some U.S. security assistance and other punitive measures.

Congressional attention on Cameroon has mounted with the escalation of the separatist rebellion in western Cameroon, often referred to as the "Anglophone conflict" or "Anglophone crisis." Congress has shaped the U.S. response to deteriorating security and governance conditions in the country through legislation and oversight activities. Members of Congress may continue to assess whether U.S. engagement with Cameroon reflects an appropriate balance of priorities and debate the effectiveness of various tools for advancing U.S. interests in the country.

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) in Cameroon

As of mid-September 2021, Cameroon had recorded around 85,000 COVID-19 infections, amounting to nearly 298 cases per 100,000 people—well below many countries worldwide, though Cameroon has conducted fewer COVID-19 tests than many countries on a per capita basis.[1] Daily recorded cases reached their peak, to date, in April 2021. In August 2020, the State Department announced that it had committed nearly $19.3 million in health and humanitarian assistance to help Cameroon respond to COVID-19.[2] In July 2021, the Biden Administration donated 303,050 single-shot COVID-19 vaccine doses to Cameroon, which has also received vaccine donations from China and via the multilateral COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) facility.[3] Cameroon's vaccination campaign has been limited amid ongoing global supply challenges for governments in low- and middle-income countries seeking to procure vaccine doses. Logistical hurdles and local vaccine hesitancy also have impeded local vaccination efforts. In a June 2021 report, for instance, the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) noted that an internal Expanded Program on Immunization (EPI) survey found that 37% of Cameroonian medical staff were unwilling to receive any vaccine.[4]

[1] Case count from Johns Hopkins University (JHU) COVID-19 Dashboard, accessed September 14, 2021. Estimate of cases per 100,000 people reflects CRS calculation based on JHU data and population figure from CIA World Factbook.

[2] State Department, "UPDATE: The United States Continues to Lead the Global Response to COVID-19," August 21, 2020.

[3] U.S. Embassy in Cameroon, "The United States Donates 303,050 Doses of Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 Vaccine to Cameroon," July 22, 2021. U.S. vaccine donations were coordinated with COVAX and the African Union.

[4] OCHA, "Cameroon: COVID-19 Emergency Situation Report No.17, 1 to 31 May 2021," June 2021.

Historical Background and Politics

Present-day Cameroon (see **Figure 1**) was formed through the 1961 merger of two separately colonized entities: French Cameroun, which gained independence from France in 1960, and Southern Cameroons, which the British administered as a semi-autonomous territory until the 1961 unification. That unification resulted from a United Nations (U.N.)-organized referendum in which a majority of Southern Cameroonians voted to merge with French Cameroon rather than integrate into neighboring Nigeria; independence as a separate country was not on the ballot. A period of federalism under President Ahmadou Ahidjo—in which majority French-speaking East Cameroon and largely English-speaking West Cameroon each ostensibly enjoyed a degree of autonomy—ensued until 1972, when voters approved a new constitution replacing the federal system with a unitary state, formalizing Ahidjo's efforts to centralize power under the Francophone-dominated central government.[5] Many Anglophone activists continue to view the 1972 constitutional revision as illegal and discriminatory. Some seek independence, while others have called for a return to federalism along the lines of the pre-1972 governance structure.[6]

Figure 1. Cameroon

Source: CRS graphic using data from Department of State; Esri; ArcWorld; and DeLorme.

[5] For further background, see Piet Konings and Francis B. Nyamnjoh, "The Anglophone Problem in Cameroon," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* vol. 35, no. 2 (1997): 207-229.

[6] International Crisis Group (ICG), "Cameroon's Anglophone Dialogue: A Work in Progress," September 26, 2019.

President Biya, age 88, has been in office since 1982, having previously served as Ahidjo's prime minister. He initially headed a single-party political system but authorized multi-party politics in 1990, amid a wave of similar transitions in Africa at the end of the Cold War. Opposition and civil society activity expanded, including by Anglophones demanding greater autonomy. In 1996, Biya promulgated a new constitution that—while retaining Cameroon's unitary governance structure—notionally devolved some powers to regional authorities, among other decentralization measures.

Political liberalization was limited. Before long, according to the International Crisis Group, Biya had enacted an "authoritarian restoration" entailing the "harassment of independent media, the selective distribution of state resources [... and] fraud and manipulation at all points in the electoral process."[7] These moves effectively neutralized the opposition, including the Anglophone-led Social Democratic Front (SDF), the leading opposition party at the time, whose share of seats in the National Assembly has steadily declined since the late 1990s. Parliament removed presidential term limits in 2008, spurring protests that security forces suppressed.

Current Political Dynamics

In recent years, the government has used the conflicts in the north and the Anglophone regions as a pretext to restrict opposition activity, press freedom, and civil society activism, according to multiple assessments.[8] Advocates have criticized a 2014 law that established an expansive definition of terrorism and grants state authorities the power to restrict freedoms of assembly and association and infringe on due process, such as by enabling indefinite detention without charge.[9]

Observers assert that political repression has intensified since Biya won a seventh term in 2018.[10] According State Department, those polls featured "intimidation of voters and representatives of candidates at polling sites, late posting of polling sites and voter lists, ballot stuffing, voters with multiple registration, and a lack of transparency in the vote tallying process."[11] After the vote, second-place finisher Maurice Kamto of the Cameroon Renaissance Movement (MRC)—which has become the main opposition force as the SDF's influence has waned—refused the recognize the result and called for protests against alleged fraud. In early 2019, authorities arrested Kamto and dozens of his supporters. Their detention attracted international criticism, including from U.S. policymakers: in March 2019, then-Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Tibor Nagy called publicly for Kamto's release, and in July 2019, the House of Representatives agreed to H.Res. 358, calling for the release of detained MRC members, among other measures.[12] Biya ordered the termination of proceedings against Kamto in late 2019, at the conclusion of a national dialogue focused on the Anglophone conflict (see "The Anglophone Conflict," below).

Authorities have continued to curtail the activity of the MRC and other opposition groups. In late 2020, authorities detained hundreds of MRC supporters and placed Kamto under house arrest for nearly three months following peaceful protests ahead of regional elections.[13] Journalists also

[7] ICG, *Cameroon: Fragile State?* 2010.

[8] According to the State Department, Cameroonian authorities have "cited laws against terrorism or protecting national security to arrest or punish critics of the government" (State Department, *2019 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Cameroon*, 2020). See also Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International (AI) annual reports.

[9] Committee to Protect Journalists, *Journalists Not Terrorists*, 2017.

[10] See, e.g., HRW, "World Report 2020: Cameroon," 2020, and HRW, "World Report 2021: Cameroon," 2021.

[11] State Department, *2018 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Cameroon*, 2019.

[12] RFI, "Le 'Monsieur Afrique' de Donald Trump entame une tournée sur le continent," March 4, 2019.

[13] The State Department reports that authorities arrested 593 MRC members in connection with those protests. State Department, *2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Cameroon*, 2021.

have faced harassment and arrest, including for reporting on the Anglophone conflict. In a case that garnered congressional attention, police detained reporter Samuel Ajiekah Abuwe (known as Wazizi) in mid-2019 for allegedly supporting Anglophone separatists. Wazizi reportedly died in military custody soon thereafter, but authorities did not report his death until the following year.[14]

President Biya's Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) party holds large majorities in the National Assembly, Senate (provided for in the 1996 constitution and inaugurated in 2013), and regional councils (inaugurated in 2020). Amid restrictions on opposition to Biya within the electoral arena, many analysts have focused attention on political dynamics within the president's inner circle, particularly in relation to Biya's eventual succession; some have raised concern over the potential for heightened instability due to political power struggles should Biya die or become incapacitated in office. More broadly, observers have expressed alarm over rising ethno-regional tensions in Cameroon: according to the International Crisis Group, the struggle between Kamto and Biya has spurred tensions between the economically influential Bamileke ethnic group in the central highlands, to which Kamto belongs, and the Bulu and Beti—southern ethnic groups perceived as loyal to Biya, an ethnic Bulu. Hate speech, including on social media, has inflamed tensions and raised concerns about the potential for violence along ethno-regional lines.[15]

Security and Humanitarian Conditions

Prior to 2013, when Boko Haram began to operate more openly in the country's north, Cameroon had enjoyed a reputation for general stability in a Central African sub-region that has experienced recurrent conflicts and humanitarian crises. As insecurity has since proliferated in Cameroon, some analysts have debated the effectiveness of what many observers have characterized as a militarized state response to security threats in the north and, more recently, the predominately Anglophone west. As discussed below, the Anglophone conflict, in particular, also has fueled debates over the viability of Cameroon's unitary, heavily centralized governance system.

Cameroon's security crises have generated high levels of displacement and humanitarian need in the north and Anglophone regions. As of August 2021, the U.N. refugee agency estimated that roughly 341,000 Cameroonians were displaced in the Far North region, which also hosts nearly 114,000 Nigerian refugees.[16] Roughly 711,000 Cameroonians were displaced in the Anglophone North West and South West, with nearly 70,000 more living as refugees across the border in southern Nigeria. Separately, eastern Cameroon hosts around 330,000 refugees fleeing protracted conflicts in neighboring Central African Republic (CAR). Residents in eastern Cameroon have faced periodic cross-border raids, kidnappings, and other threats from CAR-based militias.

Boko Haram and the Islamic State's West Africa Province (IS-WA)

Boko Haram's presence in Cameroon reportedly dates to at least 2009, the year it launched an uprising against the Nigerian state.[17] By 2013, it had expanded its activities in Cameroon's predominately Muslim Far North region from recruitment and logistical operations to include kidnappings for ransom, notably targeting foreigners. Biya declared war on Boko Haram in 2014.

[14] Reporters Without Borders, "Cameroonian journalist Samuel Wazizi died in detention," June 4, 2020. S.Res. 684, which passed the Senate during the 116th Congress, highlighted Wazizi's case in the context of "attacks on freedom of the press and detention of journalists on politically motivated charges in recent years."

[15] ICG, *Easing Cameroon's Ethno-political Tensions, On and Offline*, December 3, 2020.

[16] UNHCR, "Operational Portal: Cameroon," accessed September 14, 2021.

[17] ICG, Cameroon: Confronting Boko Haram. For background on Boko Haram and IS-WA, see CRS In Focus IF10173, *Boko Haram and the Islamic State's West Africa Province*.

Attacks in Cameroon attributed to Boko Haram and IS-WA—which split from Boko Haram in 2016, and has become the stronger faction—have since fluctuated, declining under pressure from Cameroonian and regional forces in 2015-2017 but intensifying from late 2018, as the groups reasserted their presence along Cameroon's northern border with Nigeria.

IS-WA has established itself as the stronger of the two groups in northern Cameroon and the Lake Chad Basin region more broadly. In May 2021, IS-WA militants reportedly killed Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau, prompting many former Boko Haram fighters, family members, and unaffiliated residents of former Boko Haram-controlled areas to surrender to Nigerian and Cameroonian authorities.[18] In July 2021, Cameroonian officials warned that militants appeared to be increasingly targeting state security personnel, as opposed to civilians, a pattern some analysts have attributed to strategic shifts and factional shakeups in the wake of Shekau's death.[19]

Several factors may have contributed to Boko Haram's entry into Cameroon and the resilience of armed Islamist threats in the country's north. Porous borders and ethnic, linguistic, and religious ties along the frontier between northeast Nigeria and northern Cameroon have long permitted cross-border movements of people, commerce, and ideologies. (Muslims comprise roughly one-fifth of Cameroon's population, which is largely Christian, and are primarily concentrated in the north.[20]) Before Boko Haram launched its uprising in Nigeria in 2009, some members reportedly may have used the Far North as a safe haven, and the group began to recruit more openly there in 2010-2011.[21] Perceived marginalization among residents of the Far North—which has the highest poverty rate and lowest literacy rate of any region in Cameroon[22]—may strengthen the appeal of anti-government messages and incentives that may accompany membership in Islamist armed groups, such as financial support or social standing.

Some observers have expressed concerns that the Cameroonian government's response to Boko Haram and IS-WA may have served further to alienate communities in the north. Such measures have included restrictions on cross-border movements, the closure of markets, mosques, and schools, and a ban on the wearing of full-face veils, which together have disrupted economic activity and reportedly stoked local perceptions of official anti-Muslim bias.[23] As discussed below (see "Security Force Abuses and Other Concerns"), government forces also have been implicated in extensive abuses during counterterrorism operations in the north, which may further fuel local grievances, and some personnel have reportedly redeployed to the west since the onset of the Anglophone conflict in 2017, drawing resources away from counterterrorism efforts in the north.

The Anglophone Conflict

Since 2017, the emergence of a separatist rebellion in western Cameroon has drawn attention away from insecurity in the north, while also heightening concerns about Cameroon's stability and the behavior of its security forces. Unrest began in 2016, as members of the English-speaking minority—who comprise roughly 20% of Cameroon's total population but predominate in the

[18] Nigerian authorities were unable to confirm Shekau's death, which had previously been incorrectly reported on several occasions, but stated in August 2021 that it was "safe to assume" Shekau was dead. Jeff Seldin, "Nigeria Says 'Safe to Assume' Boko Haram Leader Is Dead," *VOA*, August 24, 2021.

[19] Moki Edwin Kindzeka, "Cameroon Says Boko Haram Attacks Military, Seduces Civilians," *VOA*, July 30, 2021.

[20] There are also significant Muslim populations in parts of West region and some southern cities. State Department, *2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Cameroon*, 2021.

[21] ICG, *Cameroon: Confronting Boko Haram*.

[22] Cameroon National Institute of Statistics and ICF, *Enquête Démographique et de Santé du Cameroun 2018*, 2020.

[23] ICG, *Cameroon: Confronting Boko Haram*.

western North West and South West regions, commonly known as the Anglophone regions—launched demonstrations against perceived anti-Anglophone bias in state institutions. Protests initially centered on the appointment of French-speaking magistrates to English-speaking courts and other alleged infringements of Cameroon's "bijural" justice system, in which the Anglophone regions operate under British common law while the rest of the country follows French civil law.[24] Teachers and students also mobilized, voicing grievances concerning alleged discrimination in the education sector, and began boycotting schools in late 2016. The government responded by arresting hundreds and prosecuting prominent civil society activists on security charges.[25] By early 2017, some armed separatists began to violently enforce the school boycott and other forms of civil disobedience, such as weekly stay-at-home actions known as "ghost towns."[26]

In October 2017, protesters marked the anniversary of the 1961 merger of the Anglophone and Francophone regions (see "Historical Background and Politics") by symbolically proclaiming the independence of the North West and South West. Cameroonian security forces reportedly killed several protesters.[27] According to some analysts, the government's response helped strengthen the position of armed separatists vis-à-vis more moderate, nonviolent Anglophone activists who have continued to call for a transition to federalism and other political solutions to Anglophone grievances.[28] Armed attacks by separatist groups subsequently escalated and factions proliferated, each claiming to fight for an independent state of "Ambazonia," a reference to a bay that once marked the boundary between French- and British-held colonial territories, or "Southern Cameroons," as the Anglophone regions were known under British colonial administration.

The ensuing conflict between government forces and a fractious array of Anglophone rebel groups has displaced hundreds of thousands of people and has raised charges of extensive abuses against civilians by all parties. Armed separatists reportedly have killed hundreds of security force personnel and kidnapped or killed alleged government sympathizers, civil servants, traditional leaders, health workers, and humanitarians. Schools, an emblem of state authority and language policy, have been a focus of separatist attacks. Some rebel commanders reportedly reside outside Cameroon, and members of the diaspora in Europe and the United States have reportedly played a role in fundraising for armed groups (see **Text Box**). State security forces, meanwhile, have been accused of extrajudicial killings, torture, and other abuses during counterinsurgency efforts.

The Separatist Movement: Size, Factions, and the Role of the Diaspora

Considerable uncertainty exists regarding the size and composition of the Anglophone separatist movement. Among other challenges, access constraints and violence against journalists have hindered reporting in conflict-affected areas, impeding such assessments. A 2019 International Crisis Group (ICG) report estimated that there were between 2,000 and 4,000 armed separatists, divided between more than a dozen groups—some larger (roughly 200-500 fighters), with others consisting of several dozen combatants.[29] According to the ICG's report, "[a]bout 20 smaller semi-criminal, semi-separatist groups also exist and have a few dozen members."

Some, but not all, armed factions are allied with political formations that each claim to represent the genuine leadership of the would-be Anglophone breakaway state. These include the Interim Government of Ambazonia led

[24] On bijuralism in Cameroon, see Charles Manga Fombad, "Managing Legal Diversity: Cameroonian Bijuralism at a Critical Crossroads" in *Mixed Legal Systems, East and West,* ed. Vernon Valentine Palmer, Mohamed Y. Mattar, and Anna Koppel (London, UK: Routledge, 2015): 101-119.

[25] Center for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa (CHRDA), *Cameroon's Unfolding Catastrophe: Evidence of Human Rights Violations and Crimes Against Humanity*, June 2019.

[26] AI, *A Turn for the Worse: Violence and Human Rights Violations in Anglophone Cameroon*, 2018.

[27] AI, "Cameroon: Seventeen killed following protests in Anglophone regions," October 2, 2017.

[28] ICG, *Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis: Dialogue Remains the Only Viable Solution*, December 21, 2017.

[29] ICG, *Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis: How to Get to Talks?*

by Sisiku Julius Ayuk Tabe, imprisoned in Cameroon since January 2018; the Interim Government of Ambazonia led by Samuel Ikome Sako, who split from Ayuk Tabe after a leadership dispute in 2019; and the Ambazonia Governing Council, led by Ayaba Cho Lucas.[30] Rifts within the separatist movement have impeded the pursuit of peace negotiations and periodically led to fighting on the ground between rival separatist factions.

The crisis has galvanized Anglophone Cameroonian diaspora populations living abroad, including in the United States. Diaspora activism has arguably been significant in drawing attention to the conflict—including attention from Members of Congress representing constituencies with Cameroonian diaspora populations. (The foreign-born Cameroonian population in the United States is concentrated in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area, followed by Dallas-Fort Worth, Atlanta, and Houston metropolitan areas.[31]) The role of some diaspora members in contributing to the violence also has garnered attention among analysts and policymakers. Several separatist leaders reportedly live abroad, including in the United States. According to ICG, Anglophone armed groups were "[i]nitially funded almost exclusively by the diaspora" during the early stages of conflict.[32] Armed groups' financial reliance on the diaspora has reportedly declined as factions have increasingly self-funded (e.g., through kidnapping for ransom). It is unclear to what extent diaspora-based separatist leaders exert control over armed groups on the ground.[33] Diaspora members remain prominent within the separatist political leadership, and some have engaged in hate speech and misinformation related to the conflict on social media. Some advocates have called for the United States and other countries to take action against diaspora members implicated in inciting violence.[34]

Attempts at Settlement: The 2019 "National Dialogue" and Peace Talks

To date, little progress toward a political settlement to the Anglophone conflict has been apparent. Divisions within the separatist movement and hardliners on each side of the conflict complicate the path toward negotiations, as does the presence of criminal actors who profit from the violence through extortion and kidnapping for ransom. The Biya government held a political dialogue aimed at resolving the conflict in late 2019 (see below), but appears intent on pursuing a military solution to the crisis. Many separatist leaders continue to publicly reject any solution short of independence for the Anglophone regions. Moderate, non-violent activists have come under pressure from both sides, amid repression and political marginalization by the government and accusations of betrayal by armed separatists.[35]

National Dialogue. In September 2019, President Biya announced plans for a "major national dialogue" focused on the Anglophone conflict. Many analysts expressed doubt over the likely impact of the talks, citing the limited time for preparation (the event was held three weeks after it was announced), inadequate incentives and protections to encourage participation by separatists and moderate Anglophones, and concerns over the credibility of the facilitator, Prime Minister Joseph Dion Ngute.[36] Despite Biya's pledge to convene a range of stakeholders for the dialogue,

[30] R. Maxwell Bone, "Ahead of peace talks, a who's who of Cameroon's separatist movements," *The New Humanitarian*, July 8, 2020.

[31] U.S. Census Bureau, 2019 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates. CRS Analyst in Immigration Policy Jill H. Wilson assisted in collecting and analyzing data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

[32] ICG, *Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis: How to Get to Talks?*

[33] Ibid; HRW, "Armed Separatists' Abuse Rife in Cameroon's Anglophone Regions," March 28, 2019.

[34] HRW, "*These Killings Can Be Stopped": Abuses by Government and Separatist Groups in Cameroon's Anglophone Regions*, 2018; U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide, *Risk of Mass Atrocities in Cameroon*, 2020.

[35] For example, Anglophone lawyer Felix Agbor Nkongho (also known as Agbor Balla)—a prominent advocate of federalism—was arrested in 2017 on charges of terrorism that were later dropped, and in 2020 was dismissed from his university teaching position, allegedly in relation to an exam question on the Anglophone conflict (HRW, "No Room for Debate in Cameroon Classrooms," May 1, 2020). Separatist groups, for their part, have accused Nkongho of betraying the Anglophone cause in connection with his reporting on human rights abuses by separatist groups.

[36] See, e.g., ICG, "Cameroon's Anglophone Dialogue: A Work in Progress," September 26, 2019; R. Maxwell Bone and Akem Kelvin Nkwain, "Why Cameroon's national dialogue will accomplish nothing," *African Arguments*,

key opposition and separatist leaders remained in prison. These included opposition leader Maurice Kamto and separatist leader Ayuk Tabe. Separatists based in Cameroon and the diaspora ultimately did not attend; some moderate Anglophones also declined or walked out of the event.

The weeklong dialogue resulted in a series of proposals aimed at stemming the conflict. These included granting "special status" to the North West and South West, entailing greater autonomy over local affairs, and other measures focused on political decentralization, the reconstruction and development of the Anglophone regions, the return of displaced people, and the reintegration of combatants.[37] At the end of the dialogue, Biya ordered the termination of proceedings against Kamto and the release of over 300 people arrested in connection with the Anglophone conflict.

The dialogue did little to resolve tensions. Separatist attacks surged after the event, and legislative and regional elections held in February and December 2020, respectively, featured violence and opposition boycotts.[38] Pledged devolution efforts have been slow to progress, and may be insufficient to meet Anglophone demands for greater autonomy.[39] More broadly, analysts have questioned both the sufficiency of pledged reforms and the commitment of the Biya government to enact meaningful devolution and other concessions.[40] That past decentralization efforts faced delays and an apparent lack of commitment on the part of the Biya administration also has bred distrust. For instance, one pledge emerging from the dialogue, the creation of regional councils, was mandated in the 1996 constitution but went unimplemented until 2020. Regional council members have accused the central government of failing to provide funds for the bodies.[41]

Peace Talks. In June 2019, the Swiss government and the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, a Swiss organization, announced that they were facilitating negotiations between the government and some armed groups.[42] That effort has yielded little, if any, tangible progress, and may be stalled. Separately, in 2020, some government officials reportedly initiated direct peace talks with Ayuk Tabe, whose faction has rejected the Swiss effort as biased toward the government.[43] The government later denied those reports, casting doubt on the viability of that process.

Security Force Abuses and Other Concerns

Government forces have reportedly committed extensive human rights abuses during operations in the north and the Anglophone regions. Recent State Department annual human rights reports have documented extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, and torture and other cruel treatment by state security forces.[44] The U.S. Embassy condemned and called for investigation into some widely publicized incidents, such as a February 2020 massacre in Ngarbuh (North West

September 30, 2019.

[37] Rapporteur General of the Major National Dialogue, "Major National Dialogue - Recommendations to Restore Peace, Stability and Development," *Cameroon Tribune*, October 7, 2019.

[38] The MRC boycotted the February 2020 legislative election, and both the MRC and SDF boycotted regional elections in December 2020.

[39] Jeune Afrique, "Au Cameroun, la décentralisation lancée par Paul Biya est en suspens," June 22, 2020.

[40] R. Maxwell Bone, "Paul Biya Is Offering Cameroon's Anglophones Too Little, Too Late," *Foreign Policy*, November 21, 2020.

[41] Moki Edwin Kindzeka, "Cameroon Regional Councils Starved of Resources to Solve Anglophone Separatist Crisis," *VOA*, May 19, 2021.

[42] Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, "Swiss facilitation process in Cameroon," June 27, 2019.

[43] R. Maxwell Bone, "Cameroon's elusive peace: Rivals, rifts, and secret talks," *New Humanitarian*, March 29, 2021.

[44] See, e.g., State Department Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, 2014-2021.

region), in which security forces and allied militia killed more than 20 civilians, and a mass rape by military personnel during a March 2020 raid in Ebam (South West).[45]

Arbitrary detentions and detainee abuses have attracted particular attention from international media and human rights groups. In 2016, Amnesty International accused Cameroonian security forces of arbitrarily arresting hundreds of people they accused of supporting Boko Haram "often with little or no evidence," subjecting them to life-threatening prison conditions and torture, and violating their legal rights.[46] In 2019, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and others documented instances of arbitrary arrest, incommunicado detention, and torture of Anglophone separatists as well as opposition members in a gendarmerie detention facility in Yaoundé.[47] Separately, Cameroonian peacekeepers (and other foreign troops) serving in neighboring CAR have been implicated in sexual exploitation and abuse.[48]

Reported abuses have implicated elements of the Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR), an elite military unit that has received U.S. counterterrorism training and other support. (The BIR was established in 2001 to address banditry and other criminality, particularly in border areas; BIR personnel began receiving U.S. training in the mid-2000s.[49]) In 2017, Amnesty International accused BIR personnel of extrajudicial killings and torture, including at a facility in the Far North where it alleged that U.S. military forces were regularly present during the period in which such incidents reportedly occurred.[50] U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) denied knowledge of abuses.[51] Human rights groups also have accused BIR personnel of abuses in the Anglophone conflict, including extrajudicial killings, rape, torture, the looting and destruction of homes and other property, and the desecration of heritage sites.[52]

Security force abuses have triggered restrictions on U.S. security assistance, including support for the BIR, pursuant to the U.S. "Leahy Laws," and in 2019 prompted the United States to terminate some planned security assistance for Cameroon (see "U.S. Relations and Assistance," below). Observers have raised concerns over the possible diversion, to the Anglophone regions, of materiel provided by the United States and other donor countries to support counterterrorism efforts in the north. For instance, analysts allege that U.S.-provided vehicles and aircraft have

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[45] U.S. Embassy in Yaoundé, "U.S. Condemns Killings in Ngarbuh," February 20, 2020 and "U.S. Deeply Disturbed by Reports of Abuses in Ebam," March 2, 2021.

[46] AI, *Right Cause, Wrong Means: Human Rights Violated and Justice Denied in Cameroon's Fight Against Boko Haram,* July 2016.

[47] HRW, "Cameroon: Routine Torture, Incommunicado Detention," May 6, 2019; HRW, "Cameroon: Detainees Tortured," August 20, 2019; AI, "Cameroon: Nearly 60 opposition members tortured by security forces," July 26, 2019; Emmanuel Freudenthal, "Inside Cameroon's Bunker: 'Different guys had different torture techniques,'" *African Arguments,* May 7, 2019.

[48] Jennifer Peltz, "UN seeks inquiry into new claims of peacekeeper sexual abuse," *AP,* October 5, 2018.

[49] The BIR supplanted the Light Intervention Battalion, established in 1999. On the creation of the BIR and early human rights concerns, see *The New Humanitarian*, "IRIN Focus on banditry," August 2, 2002 and "Rapid intervention military unit strays from its mission," August 29, 2008. On early U.S. training for the BIR, see State Department, *Foreign Military Training and DoD Engagement Activities of Interest, 2005-2006,* 2006, and subsequent reports.

[50] AI, *Cameroon's Secret Torture Chambers: Human Rights Violations and War Crimes in the Fight Against Boko Haram,* July 2017.

[51] Conor Gaffey, "U.S. Military Denies Knowledge of Boko Haram Suspects 'Torture' at Base Used by American Troops," *Newsweek,* July 20, 2017.

[52] HRW, "Cameroon: New Attacks on Civilians By Troops, Separatists," March 28, 2019; Center for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa (CHRDA) and Raoul Wallenberg Center for Human Rights, *Cameroon's Unfolding Catastrophe: Evidence of Human Rights Violations and Crimes against Humanity*, June 2019; HRW, "World Heritage Site Attacked in Cameroon," October 11, 2019.

been relocated from the Far North to the west.[53] U.S. officials have stated that Cameroonian authorities have offered assurances that U.S. assistance would not be diverted from its intended use.[54] The State Department's Office of the Inspector General (OIG) has documented challenges with the oversight of some U.S.-provided military equipment intended for use in counterterrorism efforts in the north (see "Counterterrorism Cooperation and other Security Assistance").

The Economy

Cameroon is rich in natural resources. The economy relies heavily on primary commodity exports, notably of crude oil and petroleum products, including Chadian-origin oil exported via the World Bank-financed Chad-Cameroon pipeline. Other exports include timber, aluminum, and agricultural products such as coffee, cocoa, cotton, rubber, palm oil, and bananas. Cameroon ranked 153 out of 189 countries on the 2020 U.N. Human Development Index, above many African countries. Poverty in Cameroon is widespread. The World Bank reports that population growth and a "lack of redistributive policies" have impeded poverty reduction; roughly a quarter of Cameroonians live on less than $1.90 per day, according to World Bank estimates.[55]

The COVID-19 pandemic, low global oil prices, and conflict in the Anglophone regions have weighed on Cameroon's economic performance. Cameroon's economy contracted by -2.8% in 2020, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which projects a rebound to 3.6% growth in 2021—though this outlook remains highly uncertain.[56] Cameroon's recovery may depend on the government's ability to manage the continued public health threat of COVID-19. Conflict in the Anglophone regions, a hub for coffee, cocoa, rubber, banana, and palm oil production, has hampered agricultural output. Cameroon's agribusiness state-owned enterprise (SOE), the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC)—the second largest employer after the government—is headquartered in the South West, and has been attacked by armed separatists.[57]

Armed conflict has damaged Cameroon's development outlook and imparted a humanitarian and social cost. Population displacements and other conflict-related disruptions to farming have been a key challenge for women, around 40% of whom work in agriculture.[58] The United Nations and others have raised concerns over sexual violence in conflict, particularly targeting women and girls.[59] (Several prominent women-led groups have mobilized to call for improved security and human rights conditions.[60]) More broadly, women in Cameroon continue to face social biases and

[53] Chris W.J. Roberts and Billy Burton, "Cameroon's Government Is Deceiving the West While Diverting Foreign Aid," *Foreign Policy*, November 22, 2020; Billy Burton, "Has the Anglophone Crisis Diverted Cameroon's Resources from Fighting Boko Haram?" The Anglophone Crisis Monitoring Project, November 22, 2020.

[54] Siobhán O'Grady, "Divided by Language," *Washington Post*, February 5, 2019.

[55] World Bank, *Macro Poverty Outlook: Cameroon*, April 2021; IMF, World Economic Outlook database, April 2021.

[56] IMF, *Requests for Three-Year Arrangements Under the Extended Credit Facility and the Extended Fund Facility*, July 2021.

[57] In October 2019, for instance, suspected separatists reportedly assaulted six workers and kidnapped four others in an attack on a CDC plantation (CHRDA, "Statement on the Assault of CDC Workers in Tiko Rubber Plantation, the Southwest Region of Cameroon). In August 2020, suspected separatists reportedly abducted a CDC manager and three of his guards, killed a child, and burned the manager's home in an attack on a CDC settlement in Littoral region, which borders the South West (*Cameroon Tribune*, "Penda-Mboko - Suspected Separatists Arrested," August 24, 2020).

[58] Cameroon National Institute of Statistics and ICF, *Enquête Démographique et de Santé du Cameroun 2018*, 2020.

[59] See, e.g., U.N. Secretary General, *Conflict-Related Sexual Violence 2020*, S/2021/312, March 30, 2021.

[60] See, e.g., *VOA*, "Cameroon Women Appeal to the UN Security Council to Discuss Escalating Crises," June 5, 2021; Corinne Aurelie Moussi, "Women, Peace and Security in Cameroon: the missing voices of the Anglophone Crisis," *London School of Economics Blog*, November 27, 2020.

other impediments to economic advancement, despite laws prohibiting discrimination; the State Department reports that in 2020, for instance, "the overall sociocultural practice of denying women the right to own land, especially through inheritance, was prevalent in most regions."[61]

SOEs are active in other sectors, including telecommunications, energy, and mining, and "tend to have quasi-monopoly or monopsony status in their markets," according to the State Department.[62] Observers have expressed concern over mismanagement and corruption within Cameroon's SOEs and other state institutions.[63] Little information on SOE finances is public, though many reportedly operate at a loss.[64] Loss-making SOEs reportedly include the state oil refinery, the National Refining Company (SONARA), which the IMF considers "systemically important."[65] In 2019, a fire at a facility led SONARA to suspend operations, and the facility remained partly offline as of mid-2021.[66] Cameroonian authorities have restructured some of SONARA's debt. Cameroon's debt burden has risen in recent years to reach an estimated 46% of GDP in 2021.[67] China is Cameroon's top bilateral creditor, holding nearly one-fifth of its total debt stock.[68]

The government has solicited financial support from the IMF, which approved $382 million in pandemic-related emergency loans for Cameroon in 2020—separate from a three-year, $590 million IMF extended credit facility (ECF) loan package that ended in late 2020.[69] Amid reports in mid-2020 that health facilities were experiencing shortages of basic equipment, observers and opposition politicians accused the government of diverting or mismanaging COVID-19 response funds, including IMF emergency loans.[70] The "Covidgate" affair, as the allegations became known, prompted an audit by a Supreme Court investigative body that reportedly identified significant irregularities in the use of funds by several ministries and recommended a criminal inquiry.[71] The Special Criminal Court, mandated to investigate the misappropriation of public funds, has since opened an investigation into the allegations. Some human rights advocates urged the IMF to withhold budget support to Cameroon pending a transparent inquiry into the

[61] State Department, *2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices.*

[62] State Department, "2021 Investment Climate Statements: Cameroon," 2021. The legislature passed a law in 2017 (Law No. 2017/011) intended to improve the management and effectiveness of public corporations, but the State Department reports that "[a]s of 2021, it does not appear that any of these objectives have been completed."

[63] See, e.g., Moki Kindzeka, "Conflicts and corruption in Cameroon drain the economy," January 23, 2019; State Department, "2021 Investment Climate Statements."

[64] State Department, "2021 Investment Climate Statements." See also State Department, "2021 Fiscal Transparency Report: Cameroon," 2021.

[65] IMF, *Fifth Review Under the Extended Credit Facility Arrangement and Request for a Waiver of Nonobservance of a Performance Criterion and Modification of Performance Criteria—Debt Sustainability Analysis,* January 2020.

[66] Elza Turner, "Refinery News Roundup: New refinery, hydrogen projects in Africa," S&P Global, July 12, 2021.

[67] IMF, *Cameroon: Requests for Three-Year Arrangements Under the Extended Credit Facility and the Extended Fund Facility,* July 2021.

[68] Ibid.

[69] IMF, "IMF Executive Board Approves a US$226 million Disbursement to Cameroon to Address the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic," May 4, 2020, and "IMF Executive Board Approves a US$ 156 million New Disbursement for Cameroon to Address the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic," October 21, 2020. The ECF arrangement was approved at a value of $666 million, but Cameroon did not complete a sixth review necessary for the release of the final tranche of funds. IMF, *Cameroon: Request for Disbursement Under the Rapid Credit Facility,* October 5, 2020.

[70] HRW, "Cameroon: Investigate, Distribute Health Fund," June 12, 2020; Sarah Saadoun, "In Cameroon, Government Secrecy in the Management of Funds Destined for Covid-19 Response," HRW, September 24, 2020.

[71] The audit was not made public, though a (nonpublic) purported summary was widely circulated in Cameroonian media. See *Reuters*, "Cameroon state audit questions ministries' use of COVID-19 funds, says report," May 21, 2021.

expenditure of COVID-19 funds and other anti-corruption measures.[72] In July 2021, the IMF approved a new three-year, $689.5 million loan program for Cameroon.[73] Under the program, Cameroon is to publicly release the Supreme Court's audit of COVID-19-related expenditures by December 2021, among other efforts to boost the transparency of state finances.

U.S. Relations and Assistance

The State Department describes U.S.-Cameroon relations as "positive" but "adversely affected by concerns over human rights abuses, in particular in the Anglophone Northwest and Southwest Regions, and the pace of political and economic liberalization."[74] Prior to the regional expansion of the Boko Haram crisis in 2014, U.S.-Cameroon policy focused on "finding ways to influence the Cameroonian Government to adopt political reforms," according to then-Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Johnnie Carson.[75] After 2014, bilateral relations came to emphasize counterterrorism cooperation. U.S. security assistance and military sales increased (see below), and some 300 U.S. military personnel deployed to northern Cameroon in 2015 to conduct regional intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) operations.[76] That deployment ended in early 2020, as part of the Trump Administration's efforts to reduce and reorient the U.S. military presence in Africa.[77]

Annual State Department and USAID-administered assistance for Cameroon has increased over the past decade. USAID added Cameroon as a President's Malaria Initiative (PMI) focus country in 2017 and, in 2019, USAID upgraded its presence in Cameroon to an office (a bilateral USAID mission in Cameroon closed in 1994). According to public budget materials, State Department and USAID-administered assistance for Cameroon included $66.2 million in FY2020 appropriations. Health programs comprised over 90% of this total; the balance included funds for democracy and governance programs ($4.0 million) and military professionalization ($800,000). The Biden Administration requested $114.2 million for Cameroon in FY2022.[78] These figures do not include emergency assistance provided in response to Cameroon's humanitarian and displacement crises, which public budget materials do not disaggregate by country.

Counterterrorism Cooperation and other Security Assistance

Public budget materials do not provide country-level funding data on U.S. security assistance provided through regionally and centrally managed programs, the primary vehicles through which Cameroon has received U.S. counterterrorism training and equipment. This arguably poses a challenge for congressional oversight, and makes it difficult to comprehensively assess the scale

[72] HRW, "IMF: Make Cameroon Loan Contingent on Anti-Corruption," June 18, 2021.

[73] IMF, "IMF Executive Board Approves US$ 689.5 Million Arrangements Under the Extended Credit Facility and Extended Fund Facility for Cameroon," July 29, 2021.

[74] State Department, "U.S. Relations with Cameroon," December 20, 2019.

[75] Testimony of Assistant Secretary Carson before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on African Affairs, "Examining the U.S. Policy Response to Entrenched African Leadership," 112th Cong., 2nd sess., April 18, 2012.

[76] White House, "Letter From The President—War Powers Resolution Regarding Cameroon," October 14, 2015.

[77] On U.S.-Africa engagement during the Trump Administration, see CRS Report R45428, *Sub-Saharan Africa: Key Issues and U.S. Engagement*, coordinated by Tomás F. Husted.

[78] State Department annual budget justifications for Department of State and Foreign Operations.

and scope of counterterrorism or other security assistance for Cameroon.[79] The State Department added Cameroon as a partner country under the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP) in 2014 and the Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund (CTPF) in 2016. Over the past decade, Cameroon also has ranked as a top African recipient of Department of Defense (DOD) global train-and-equip assistance (authorized under 10 U.S.C. 333).[80] The country has received additional support under the Global Security Contingency Fund (GSCF), administered jointly by the State Department and DOD, among other U.S. security assistance programs.

Since 2015, U.S. security assistance funding has provided Cameroon with, among other materiel, Cessna aircraft and accompanying modifications to support ISR capabilities, ScanEagle unmanned aerial vehicle systems, armored personnel carriers (APCs) and other vehicles, and logistics equipment.[81] Cameroonian personnel have received U.S. specialized counterterrorism training, such as in explosive ordinance disposal.[82] The United States has provided logistics and advisory support for the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), a regional force combating Boko Haram and IS-WA comprising troops from Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Benin.

The United States has provided Cameroon with training and equipment to support maritime security operations in the Gulf of Guinea, which rank among the world's most dangerous waters for piracy and other criminality.[83] The United States provided several small naval vessels to Cameroon in 2017, and more recently approved a transfer of two former Coast Guard cutters to Cameroon under the Excess Defense Articles program.[84] Cameroon's military has received additional U.S. support in the context of its peacekeeping deployments, the largest of which is to CAR, with 750 troops and 277 police deployed there as of July 2021.[85]

U.S. "Leahy laws," which prohibit the provision of U.S. security assistance to security force units implicated in gross violations of human rights, have precluded some Cameroonian personnel, including selected BIR units, from receiving certain types of U.S. security assistance.[86] In 2020, the State Department designated Cameroon under the Child Soldiers Prevention Act (CSPA, Title IV of P.L. 110-457) for its recruitment and use of child soldiers, a designation that can trigger restrictions on U.S. security assistance. The Trump Administration waived such restrictions for Cameroon for FY2021, and the State Department removed Cameroon from the CSPA list in 2021.

In 2020, the State Department's Office of the Inspector General (OIG) identified various deficiencies in the management of assistance under TSCTP.[87] Based on a review of eight TSCTP

[79] See CRS Report R46368, *U.S. Assistance to Sub-Saharan Africa: An Overview*, coordinated by Tomás F. Husted.

[80] CRS assessment based on DOD notifications to Congress of planned security cooperation activities.

[81] DOD contract announcements provide detail on these procurements. On the Cessna aircraft, see DOD, "Contracts For Sept. 21, 2016," September 21, 2016, and "Contracts For May 9, 2016," May 9, 2016. On the ScanEagle systems, see DOD, "Contracts For Sept. 29, 2015," September 29, 2015. On the APCs and other vehicles, see DOD, "Contracts For Sept. 25, 2015," September 25, 2015, and DOD, "Contracts For Sept. 23, 2016," September 23, 2016. On support for logistics systems, see DOD, "Contracts For April 20, 2017," April 20, 2017. Media have reported delivery of other U.S.-provided material (see, e.g., *Jane's*, "Cameroon's Bastion APCs now in action," June 6, 2018).

[82] See, e.g., DOD, "Cameroon's Troops Learn About Counter-Bomb Operations," November 24, 2017.

[83] CRS In Focus IF11117, *Gulf of Guinea: Recent Trends in Piracy and Armed Robbery*, by Tomás F. Husted.

[84] U.S. Embassy Yaoundé, "U.S. Contributes to Gulf of Guinea Maritime Security," January 21, 2020; U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency, Excess Defense Articles database, accessed September 15, 2021.

[85] U.N. Peacekeeping, "Troop and Police Contributors," accessed September 15, 2021.

[86] See response by then-U.S. Ambassador to Cameroon Michael S. Hoza in AI, Cameroon's Secret Torture Chambers. See also CRS In Focus IF10575, *Human Rights Issues: Security Forces Vetting ("Leahy Laws")*.

[87] State OIG, *Audit of the Department of State Bureau of African Affairs Monitoring and Coordination of the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership Program*, 2020.

awards, the report identified potential wasteful spending of $201.6 million due to mismanagement and inadequate oversight. Of this total, $77.5 million had funded programs in or involving Cameroon. Moreover, OIG assessed that U.S. officials could not ensure that U.S.-provided equipment was being used for its intended purpose. The OIG's report documented that:

> "OSC [Office of Security Cooperation] Chiefs in Cameroon and Niger did not have information on the location of equipment awarded through the Logistical Support for Counter Boko Haram project. The equipment included armored vehicles, spare parts, and radio equipment, all of which are high-risk exports in United States Munitions List. They were also not able to confirm if the equipment was being used as intended."

U.S. Responses to Human Rights Concerns

Restrictions on Security Assistance. In early 2019, citing human rights concerns, the State Department stated that it would withhold roughly $17 million in planned security assistance for Cameroon. Press reports indicated that affected funds included support for radar equipment, four patrol boats, nine armored vehicles, and various aircraft training programs; DOD also reportedly rescinded Cameroon's eligibility for a National Guard State Partnership Program and withheld some counterterrorism support.[88] In congressional testimony after the decision was made public, then-AFRICOM Commander General Thomas D. Waldhauser stated that Cameroon had "been a good partner with us counterterrorism wise, but you can't neglect ... alleged atrocities."[89] He stated that certain U.S. security assistance would continue, including support for ScanEagle unmanned aerial vehicle systems and Cessna aircraft used in counterterrorism operations in the north.

Termination of African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) Benefits. In 2019, President Trump terminated Cameroon's eligibility for duty-free access to the U.S. market under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA, P.L. 106-200, as amended), pursuant to a determination that "the Government of Cameroon currently engages in gross violations of internationally recognized human rights."[90] That termination took effect January 1, 2020.

Visa Restrictions Related to the Anglophone Conflict. U.S. officials have continued to call for an inclusive dialogue without preconditions focused on resolving the conflict in the Anglophone regions.[91] As violence has persisted, some have called for the United States to impose sanctions on individuals found responsible for inciting violence or committing human rights abuses; in the 116th Congress, S.Res. 684, passed by the Senate, urged the Department of State, Department of the Treasury, and other U.S. agencies to "consider imposing targeted sanctions on individual government and separatist leaders 'responsible for extrajudicial killings, torture, or other gross violations of internationally recognized human rights.'" In June 2021, the State Department announced a policy "imposing visa restrictions on [unnamed] individuals who are believed to be

[88] Ryan Browne and Jennifer Hansler, "US to cut aid to Cameroon due to alleged human rights violations," CNN, February 7, 2019.

[89] Testimony of then-AFRICOM Commander General Thomas D. Waldhauser before the Senate Armed Services Committee, "United States Africa Command and United States Southern Command," hearing, 116th Cong., 1st Sess., February 7, 2019.

[90] White House, "Message to the Congress on Terminating the Designation of Cameroon as a Beneficiary Sub-Saharan African Country Under the African Growth and Opportunity Act," October 31, 2019.

[91] State Department, "U.S. Concerned Over Violence Uptick in Cameroon," November 6, 2018.

responsible for, or complicit in, undermining the peaceful resolution of the crisis in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon."[92]

Recent Congressional Engagement

Congress has acted in response to reported security force abuses. Provisions in successive State, Foreign Operations, and Other Programs appropriations measures (most recently, Division K of P.L. 116-260, §7042b) have directed that Title IV (International Security Assistance) funds for Cameroonian forces, including the BIR, "may only be made available to counter regional terrorism, including Boko Haram and other Islamic State affiliates, participate in international peacekeeping operations, and for military education and maritime security programs." That provision appears primarily intended to restrict U.S. support for units or capabilities that may be used in the Anglophone conflict. The joint explanatory statement accompanying P.L. 116-260 also directed the Secretary of State to submit quarterly reports to Congress "on the status of investigations conducted by the Government of Cameroon of security force personnel who have been credibly alleged to have committed, ordered, or covered up gross violations of human rights," and on security force units that have been denied aid pursuant to the Leahy laws.[93]

In 2019 and 2020, some Senators also proposed to amend annual National Defense Authorization Acts (NDAAs) for FY2020 and FY2021, respectively, to restrict security assistance for Cameroon until the Secretaries of Defense and State certify that such forces demonstrate improved adherence to human rights standards, particular in the Anglophone regions.[94] Similar to the aforementioned §7042b, assistance for counterterrorism efforts in the Far North would have been exempted from the restriction in these amendments. Neither amendment was adopted.

Immigration and Asylum-Seeker Issues

In 2020 and 2021, several Members of Congress expressed alarm over alleged mistreatment of Cameroonian asylum-seekers by U.S. immigration authorities and the safety of those removed from the United States.[95] Some have expressed support for deportation relief for Cameroonian asylum-seekers on humanitarian grounds, such as under Temporary Protected Status (TPS).[96] In April 2021, Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas reportedly stated that the Biden Administration was reviewing the possibility of granting TPS for Cameroonian nationals.[97]

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[92] State Department, "Announcement of Visa Restrictions on Those Undermining the Peaceful Resolution of the Crisis in the Anglophone Regions of Cameroon," June 7, 2021.

[93] Joint Explanatory Statement Accompanying Division K of P.L. 116-260, p. 2103.

[94] Senators Richard Durbin, Ben Cardin, Chris Van Hollen, and Tim Kaine proposed the amendment to the FY2020 NDAA (Office of Senator Durbin, "Durbin, Cardin, Van Hollen, Kaine Introduce NDAA Amendment To Halt Security Assistance To Cameroon," June 25, 2019). Senators Durbin, Cardin, and Van Hollen proposed the amendment to the FY2021 NDAA (Office of Senator Durbin, "Durbin Joins Risch, Cardin In Condemning In Violence In Anglophone Cameroon," September 9, 2020).

[95] See, for example, letter from Representatives Bennie Thompson and Karen Bass to Tony Pham, Senior Official Performing the Duties of the Director, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, October 13, 2020; letter from Senators Chris Van Hollen, Edward Markey, Chris Coons, and Ben Cardin to Acting Secretary of Homeland Security Chad Wolf, October 28, 2020; letter from Representative Jerrold Nadler and Zoe Lofgren to Acting Secretary of Homeland Security David Pekoske, February 1, 2021.

[96] See, for example, letter from Representatives Zoe Lofgren and Jerrold Nadler to Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas, July 30, 2021; Letter from Senator Van Hollen, Rep. Anthony Brown, and other Members to President Biden and Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas, February 17, 2021.

[97] Geneva Sands, "DHS reviewing humanitarian protections for Haitians and others in the US," CNN, April 30, 2021.

Outlook and Issues for Congress

Congressional attention on Cameroon has mounted since 2017, as the Anglophone conflict has heightened U.S. concerns with human rights and security force abuses in Cameroon and galvanized the U.S.-based Cameroonian diaspora to call for U.S. action in response to the conflict. Congress has shaped U.S. engagement with Cameroon through its authorization and appropriation of U.S. assistance, communications with the executive branch and Cameroonian officials, and oversight activities, including a 2018 hearing on crises in Cameroon.[98] During the 116th Congress, the House and Senate respectively passed H.Res. 358 and S.Res. 684, which each largely focused on the Anglophone conflict and called for a ceasefire, an end to human rights abuses, and a credible dialogue. As noted, Congress also has acted to restrict State Department-administered security assistance for Cameroon that may be used in the Anglophone regions.

Amid continued regional security threats, global health challenges, and concern over security and human rights conditions in Cameroon, Members may debate the merit of various policy tools for advancing U.S. interests in the country. In light of claims that Cameroonian forces have diverted U.S.-provided materiel from the north to the Anglophone regions, Members also may debate whether current measures for monitoring the end-use of U.S. security assistance are sufficient to ensure that U.S. equipment is put to its intended use.

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[98] House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations, *Crisis in the Republic of Cameroon*, hearing, 115th Congress, 2nd sess, June 27, 2018.