

EXPERT MEETING ON ASSESSING ATROCITY RISK IN NORTHWEST AND SOUTHWEST CAMEROON

Rapporteur's Report

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On March 22, 2021, the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum brought together a small group of experts to better specify the risk for mass atrocities (systematic, large-scale violence against civilian populations) and plausible scenarios in Cameroon's Northwest and Southwest regions using atrocity early warning frameworks. This rapporteur's report summarizes major observations raised during the meeting.

Introduction

In response to ongoing atrocities in Cameroon's Northwest and Southwest regions, this expert meeting focused on ways in which atrocity risk could be heightened. In order to better specify the mass atrocity risks, meeting participants explored plausible scenarios in which atrocities would significantly worsen. These "worst-case" scenarios, detailed below, can inform atrocity prevention efforts and assist in generating targeted policy suggestions. The scenarios are not predictions, but they highlight some of the ways atrocities *could* worsen in coming months and years.

Recent Developments and Areas of Concern

Much of the violence in the Northwest and Southwest regions in recent years has been perpetrated by the Cameroonian state and Anglophone armed separatist groups. However, participants noted that the Anglophone crisis has exacerbated intercommunal tensions and violence, and that some pre-existing tensions are being reinscribed into the conflict. Participants noted that intercommunal violence poses a unique risk because community members have better access to and information about potential local civilian targets. Participants noted that an increase in this type of violence could mean a rise in violence between largely Muslim Fulani herders and largely Christian farming communities in the Northwest region, increased violence between the Northwest and Southwest regions, attacks perpetrated against Anglophones in other regions outside of the Northwest and Southwest, or reprisal attacks against Francophone Cameroonians in cities.

Participants also commented on a widening rift between the Northwest and Southwest regions following the kidnapping and killings of Southwestern chiefs. Participants found that on social media many people in the Southwest believe that these kidnappings are being perpetrated by Northwesterners. They also expressed concern for a recent rise in hate speech against Northwesterners, both on and offline. This rift could be exploited by government forces,

potentially intensifying the crisis. This dynamic could make the ongoing crisis much more difficult to solve, as a conflict-within-the-conflict would complicate attempts to find resolution.

Participants listed a number of other developments as areas of concern. First, participants noted that security forces continue to pursue a military solution to the crisis with little accountability for the atrocities committed by such forces. They raised concerns that military solutions in an environment of impunity increases the risk for possible future atrocities. A second area of concern was the possibility that the conflict would become “frozen,” with atrocities occurring every day under the radar, no longer attracting public attention. Thirdly, participants also discussed the lack of space for moderate voices, which makes it harder to reach a peaceful resolution. They said that if this trend continues, it could mean only those with extreme views would be allowed in public discussion.

Participants also discussed a few developments that might mitigate the risk of mass atrocities. One such trend is the lack of unity among separatists groups. Participants commented that the disunity among separatists decreases the risk of a major attack by these groups. Finally, participants discussed the impact of the rainy season, which makes some roads impassable. This could decrease the risk of atrocities in the short term, but requires close monitoring in the return to the dry season.

Plausible Scenarios for the Escalation of Mass Atrocities

In addition to highlighting these recent developments and other indicators of atrocity risk, participants discussed three specific scenarios that could potentially trigger mass atrocities in Cameroon.

The first scenario participants discussed was the possibility of *an assassination of a top-level military officer or a large group of soldiers by armed separatists*, which could prompt a disproportionate response from government forces. One participant pointed to the [recent killing](#) of a young captain perpetrated by separatists, stating that such attacks lend credibility to separatists and create strong discomfort in the military ranks, which could lead to a disproportionate response by the military against civilians. The participant noted that deaths on the battlefield seemed to evoke weaker reactions than the assassination of senior officers. Others noted that battlefield assassinations were less likely because of the superior technology held by government forces. Documented attacks in major towns like Bamenda and Buea indicate separatists have infiltrated cities, where there could be a high-level assassination if an officer was at “the wrong place at the wrong time.” Participants also noted separatist groups’ increasing capacity to kill soldiers *and* civilians because of new access to weapons such as IEDs. These groups are receiving training on how to construct IEDs from groups in Nigeria, and groups are using palm oil to create explosives in Cameroon. These weapons could be used against armored vehicles and therefore create an increased risk for an assassination of a high-level military officer. In this scenario, the Cameroonian military might retaliate with widespread attacks on civilians. Participants cited evidence of the military’s [history of retaliatory attacks](#) against civilians they suspected of aiding separatists.

Participants discussed a second scenario in which mass atrocities might occur, one in which *separatists mobilize violence against Mbororos, a subgroup of the Fulani ethnic group in Cameroon*. Longstanding herder-farmer conflicts between Fulani herders and farming communities in the Northwest region have been inflamed by the Anglophone crisis and recent hate speech. Ethnic Fulani vigilantes have at times sided with state security forces in attacks on civilians, while armed separatist groups have deliberately attacked ethnic Fulani civilians. Hate for and violence against Fulanis could unify separatists and Biafran groups in Nigeria, creating a more coordinated perpetrator group, increasing separatists' capacity, and increasing the risk of mass atrocities perpetrated against Fulanis.

The third worst-case scenario for mass atrocities participants discussed was *a presidential succession crisis in the event of President Biya's sudden death*. President Biya is the oldest head-of-state in Africa at 88 years old and has been in power for 38 years. One participant said that Biya's death could create an "outright rebellion," which political authorities would have little means to handle. This risk would be heightened if Biya's successor was not also from the Bulu ethnic group. In the event of Biya's death, the Rapid Intervention Battalion, Cameroon's special forces with a direct line to the presidency and a history of committing atrocities against civilians, would enjoy increased political power. Participants noted that the ethnic composition of the army is "highly skewed" towards the President's ethnic group. They posited that soldiers might refuse to serve under a president from another ethnic group. This could lead to rebellion, a coup, or a full-blown civil war, which would alter the dynamics of the Anglophone crisis and increase the risk of atrocities against civilians in the Anglophone regions. Participants discussed that Biya's death was not the only path to a presidential succession crisis—a prolonged illness or incapacitation could also render Biya unable to serve. Some considered this scenario to be an even higher risk for civilians because of the uncertainty and confusion that could follow. Additionally, they noted that in a presidential succession crisis, foreign actors—in particular France—would need to take quick action. A delayed response could lead to heightened risk for civilians in the Anglophone regions.