

Cameroon

15 July 2025 | POPULATIONS AT RISK



RISK LEVEL: IMMINENT RISK

Civilians in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon are at imminent risk of atrocity crimes due to continued violence between government forces and armed separatists. Armed extremist groups also pose an ongoing threat in the Far North region.

BACKGROUND:

In 2016 English-speaking lawyers, students and teachers in Cameroon began protesting their cultural marginalization by the Francophone-dominated government, leading to a violent crackdown by security forces in the north-west and south-west regions, an area predominantly inhabited by the country's Anglophone minority. In October 2017 Anglophone separatists proclaimed independence and declared a new state of "Ambazonia" in the north-west and south-west regions. Since then, armed separatists and Cameroonian security forces have clashed, resulting in widespread atrocities against the civilian population. More than 6,500 people have been killed since 2016, though the actual numbers are believed to be higher.

During the conflict, 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. Armed separatists have also killed, kidnapped and terrorized populations while steadily asserting control over large parts of the Anglophone regions. Separatists and government forces have both perpetrated targeted attacks on health facilities and humanitarian workers, restricting the delivery of and access to vital aid and forcing various international humanitarian organizations to suspend their operations. Separatists have also banned government education and frequently attack, threaten and abduct students and teachers, as well as burn, destroy and loot schools.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), more than 1.5 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance in the Anglophone regions. OCHA also estimates that at least 334,098 people have been internally displaced by violence in the two regions while more than 76,493 have fled to Nigeria.

Despite the continuously volatile security and humanitarian situation, the government of 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. The international community has also taken limited action. The Council of the European Union, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and others have appealed for an end to the violence and urged government action while additional actors have previously offered to serve as mediators. Recently, President Paul Biya rejected a mediation attempt by former African presidents aimed at resolving the crisis in the Anglophone regions. The UN Security Council (UNSC) has held only one meeting on Cameroon, an Arria-formula meeting on the humanitarian situation, in 2019.

In the Far North region, populations also face atrocity risks posed by the armed extremist group Boko Haram. Reports from think tanks indicate a significant surge in violence in recent years, with at least 720 incidents and 780 fatalities linked to militant Islamists in 2024, marking nearly a threefold increase in incidents and a doubling of fatalities compared to 2022.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS:

The situation in the north-west and south-west remains marked by violence against civilians and ongoing displacement. On 11 March clashes between armed separatist groups

and government forces in Owe village, south-west region, forced more than 710 people to temporarily flee their homes, seeking refuge in nearby bushes and surrounding villages. During March OCHA reported 189 protection incidents affecting 140 individuals in the Anglophone regions. The most common incident types included 63 victims of abductions for ransom, 31 of arbitrary arrests and detentions and 22 of physical assaults or abuse unrelated to sexual and gender-based violence. The highest concentration of incidents was reported in the Mezam Division, north-west region, and accounted for the majority of victims (132), reflecting a concentration of insecurity.

The security situation further deteriorated during April, according to the UN Refugee Agency's (UNHCR) Global Protection Cluster, while OCHA reported close to 200 protection incidents. Human rights violations continue unabated, fueled by recurring attacks, abductions, unlawful arrests, arbitrary detentions, theft and the deliberate destruction of personal property. Restrictions on freedom of movement and frequent lockdowns continue to disrupt daily life and severely undermine socio-economic activities. The persistent use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) on public roads and in densely populated areas continue to pose a threat to civilians and humanitarian workers. On 14 April an IED exploded at a public market in Nkwen, Bamenda, directly targeting civilians, though no fatalities were recorded.

In the Far North region, UNHCR documented 1,367 human rights violations during the first quarter of 2025 – a sharp increase from previous reporting periods. Islamist extremist groups continue to abduct civilians for ransom, with men and boys particularly targeted due to perceived financial means. These kidnappings, along with ongoing attacks and livestock theft, serve as key funding sources for the groups' operations.

ANALYSIS:

The international community often perceives the conflict in the Anglophone region exclusively as an insurgency by armed separatist groups against the Cameroonian government. However, the situation is much more complex. Although the Anglophone and Francophone areas of Cameroon have been unified since 1961, there is a long history of disputes over the extent to which access to government resources is controlled by the French-speaking majority.

Civilian populations, particularly women and children, are disproportionately bearing the brunt of violence and face heightened risk of abuse and exploitation. The targeting of

individuals based upon their cultural identity poses a direct threat to Anglophone civilians and may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity. Ethnic communities are also often targeted for their alleged collaboration with either side of the conflict.

The conflict dynamics in the Anglophone regions have changed as the crisis has become increasingly financially lucrative, with separatist groups having expanded their sources of revenue through kidnapping and extortion. Armed separatist groups are increasingly disorganized and in competition with one another, making the situation – and possible pathways to peace – extremely challenging.

The risk of atrocities will continue if the root causes of the conflict, including poor quality of government services, weak governance and marginalization of parts of the population by a highly centralized state, remain unaddressed.

RISK ASSESSMENT:

- Past or present discriminatory, restrictive or exclusionary practices, policies or legislation against marginalized communities and persons belonging to minority groups.
- Politicization of identity, past events or motives to engage in violence.
- Increased fragmentation of armed groups posing a significant challenge to conflict termination and sustainable peace.
- Policy or practice of impunity for – or tolerance of – serious violations of International Human Rights Law (IHRL) and International Humanitarian Law (IHL), atrocity crimes or their incitement.
- A security sector that lacks professionalism and engages in violations of IHRL and IHL.

NECESSARY ACTION:

Security forces must end all extrajudicial killings of unarmed civilians and ensure that the human rights of all Cameroonians are equally protected, regardless of cultural identity. Security forces implicated in violations of IHL and IHRL should be investigated and held accountable. Armed separatist groups must halt attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure. Safe and unfettered humanitarian access should be restored and guaranteed.

Foreign governments and regional organizations should suspend all military assistance to Cameroon until its security forces have made demonstrable progress toward upholding the human rights of all Cameroonians. Civilian protection must be enhanced in the Far North region.

The government should address the historical marginalization and socio-economic exclusion of Anglophone communities through targeted development programs, equitable political representation and language rights protections. The government should hold an inclusive dialogue with parties to the Anglophone crisis, mediated by a neutral player on neutral territory.

The African Union and Economic Community of Central African States should work with the government to prevent further deterioration of the conflict. Efforts by the UN's Regional Office for Central Africa, including good offices, must prioritize finding a political solution to the violence and encourage inclusive dialogue. The UNSC should discuss the situation in Cameroon and urge parties to the conflict to end hostilities and find a peaceful solution to the multifaceted crisis.