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Averting War in Northern Somalia

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What's new? The self-declared republic of Somaliland and Puntland, an autonomous Somali region, are engaged in a perilous standoff over long-contested areas Sool and Sanaag. After repeated deadly clashes since the start of 2018, both sides are using incendiary rhetoric, are massing forces in the contested areas and have shunned UN diplomacy.

Why does it matter? An escalation would likely herald a protracted conflict with devastating consequences for northern Somalia and the potential to fuel further instability across the country. It could provoke enormous displacement and create space for the Islamist Al-Shabaab insurgency and a small local Islamic State branch.

What should be done? The UN should renew its mediation, with the Somali government and Ethiopia, which enjoys ties to Puntland and Somaliland, backing those efforts. Priorities are brokering a ceasefire and ensuring both sides commit to withdraw troops, allow in humanitarian aid, quieten inflammatory rhetoric and conduct future talks to resolve the dispute.

I. Overview

A longstanding military standoff between Somaliland and Puntland over the disputed Sool and Sanaag regions is in grave danger of escalating. Both sides are reportedly massing large numbers of troops close to Tukaraq, a strategically located town that has become a front line in the battle for control. The tempo of artillery and mortar shelling around the town appears to have increased since 22 June 2018. Leaders on both sides have stepped up inflammatory rhetoric. Efforts to mediate have petered out.

Both Somaliland and Puntland have enjoyed relative peace and stability for nearly three decades as war plagued the rest of the country. Somaliland declared itself independent from Somalia in 1991 though no country formally recognises it as such. Puntland is a semi-autonomous federal state of Somalia, with its capital in Garowe. A confrontation between them would have disastrous consequences for much of northern Somalia but also risks contributing to instability across the country. It also could play into the hands of the Al-Shabaab insurgency or even the Islamic State (ISIS) branch in Puntland.

African and Western leaders, seemingly caught off guard by the looming confrontation, should take urgent steps to head it off. The United Nations mission in Somalia, which had been mediating between the two sides, should renew those efforts. Ethiopia, which enjoys close ties to both Somaliland and Puntland and has helped calm previous disputes, should throw its weight behind UN efforts; others with influence, including potentially the United Arab Emirates and Western donors, should do the same. Mediation should focus on quickly brokering a ceasefire and seeking an agreement that would entail both sides pulling forces out of contested areas, guaranteeing access for humanitarian assistance to populations in those areas and submitting to a longer-term process, including third-party mediation, to find a durable solution to the dispute. In tandem with the mediation, the UN mission also should support local peacebuilding initiatives in both disputed areas, involving clerics and local clan leaders to initiate bottom-up reconciliation efforts, which have proven successful elsewhere in Somalia.

II. The Recent Escalation and its Potential Costs

Since 1998 Somaliland and Puntland have vied for control of the Sool and Sanaag regions, together comprising a neck of land stretching from the Gulf of Aden to the Ethiopian border. Thus far, 2018 has been an exceptionally violent year in this contest, with about twenty armed clashes recorded since January.¹ A battle on 8 January saw Somaliland forces overrun Tukaraq, a town held by a small Puntland force, straddling a major highway and trade corridor that links Sool and Sanaag to eastern Ethiopia. The fighting left dozens of soldiers dead on both sides.² The capture of Tukaraq, which coincided with an extensive tour of Puntland by Somali federal government President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed “Farmajo”, was seen as a warning from Somaliland to the Somali government against getting involved in the contested areas.³ On 15 May, tensions again spiralled into violence. A militia loyal to Puntland launched an attack on Somaliland army positions around Tukaraq. This time, intense fighting reportedly killed close to a hundred combatants, including fighters from both sides, making it the deadliest confrontation the conflict has yet seen.⁴

The loss of Tukaraq in January and the heavy casualties incurred since have gone down badly in Puntland. Politicians and the public have directed recriminations not only at the Somaliland government in Hargeisa but against the administration of Puntland President Abdiweli Gas. The president is under increasing pressure to act, especially given elections later this year that he hopes to win. The recapture of Tukaraq appears to be a priority. During the first weeks of June, Gas has chaired a series of meetings to mobilise support for an offensive; during the latest, he delivered an address to the state parliament in which he vowed to “liberate” all areas

¹ Incident data compiled by security researchers obtained by Crisis Group.

² Ibid.

³ Crisis Group interviews, security analysts, Hargeisa, June 2018.

⁴ Crisis Group telephone interviews, security sources, Sool region, June 2018.

“occupied” by Somaliland.⁵ By ratcheting up such expectations, the president is taking a huge gamble. In the short term, he gains political capital, especially as the public mood hardens against Hargeisa. But a failed offensive would risk a serious backlash that could doom his re-election prospects.

If Gas’s rhetoric is increasingly bellicose, so, too, is that of Somaliland leader Muse Bihi, who said: “If they want war we are ready. I will teach them the lesson that I taught [Siad Barre]”.⁶

Indeed, the two sides’ public statements suggest both are confident in a quick military win. They are likely miscalculating. Their militaries are almost equally matched in combat strength, equipment and experience so risk getting bogged down in a protracted conflict with enormous costs (perhaps Somaliland has a slight edge but unlikely enough of one for a decisive victory).⁷ Prolonged fighting would likely trigger mass displacement, compounding what has long been a humanitarian emergency in Somalia. Such a war would sow new instability in the region, exacerbate inter- and intra-clan frictions and perhaps allow jihadists active in remote coastal and mountain enclaves the opportunity to recruit and extend their reach.

Puntland is particularly vulnerable to upheaval in the event of a lengthy war with Somaliland. Its forces are overstretched, fighting low-level but costly local insurgencies in the Galgala mountains along the northern coast; securing restive frontiers around Galkayo, south of Puntland in Somalia’s north-central region; and policing towns periodically targeted by a local ISIS branch and Al-Shabaab.⁸ War with Somaliland would force it to fight on multiple fronts, particularly because its rival potentially could stoke existing conflicts in an attempt to further sap Puntland’s military resources.

For its part, Somaliland also has struggled to contain pockets of discontent in recent years. President Bihi’s administration has faced a recurrent inter-clan conflict in Ceel Afweyn, in Sanaag region, that pits two major branches of the Isaq clan – Bicido/Habar Jeclo and Saad Yonis/Habar Yonis – against each other. The conflict’s roots lie in a long-running Habar Jeclo versus Habar Yonis feud that intensified during the 2017 election, which Bihi, backed by a Habar Jeclo-led alliance, won. That election increased regional and sub-clan rivalries, with much of the opposition to the Bihi administration now concentrated in the east, especially in Burco, Somaliland’s second largest city.⁹ Such local opposition to Hargeisa could expand into more serious political instability were the conflict with Puntland to escalate.

For Somaliland a conflict with Puntland also could tarnish its hard-won regional and international reputation as a stable and well-run polity. The crucial donor support upon which Somaliland relies for its development is predicated not only on sustained progress in governance, but also on its restraint in and peaceful resolution of conflicts. A war over Sool and Sanaag risks eroding Somaliland’s standing abroad.

⁵ Voice of America (Somali), 23 June 2018.

⁶ “Somaliland’s Bihi Puntland’s Gaas Trade War Of Words Over Tukaraq Fighting”, Radio Dalsan (www.radiodalsan.com), 15 May 2018.

⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomat and security experts, Nairobi, June 2018.

⁸ Crisis Group Commentary, “Galkayco and Somalia’s Dangerous Faultlines”, 10 December 2015; Crisis Group Commentary, “The Islamic State Threat in Somalia’s Puntland State”, 17 November 2016.

⁹ “One killed, two injured in Burao protests against Tukaraq fighting”, Goobjoog News (www.goobjoog.com), 15 May 2018.

III. The Long Road to Tukaraq

The conflict over Sool and Sanaag has been gestating for decades. It owes its genesis, in large part, to the collapse of Somalia's central state in 1991. Somaliland and Puntland went their own way but were at political odds, with the former unilaterally declaring independence in 1991 and the latter founding itself in 1998 as a federal state notionally loyal to a unified Somalia (though at the time no internationally recognised central government existed). The chaotic carve-up of territory in Somalia left large areas contested, beyond even the nominal control of either Somaliland or Puntland, with clans in those areas, including the Dhulbahante and Warsangeli in Sool and Sanaag, aggrieved and disempowered.¹⁰

Both Somaliland and Puntland staked claims to these areas – with Somaliland's bid based on boundaries drawn when it was a British protectorate, and Puntland's on kinship ties between its largest clan, the Majerten, and the two main clans living in Sool and Sanaag, the Dhulbahante and Warsangeli. All three of these clans are part of the larger Darood/Harti clan family. This gave Garowe an advantage as it struggled against Hargeisa to win the loyalty of the Dhulbahante and Warsangeli.

For many years Puntland and Somaliland saw their competition as political. Both invested in better relations with the two clans, including paying two sets of "civil servants" to run parallel administrations, though allowing them a large degree of autonomy in running their affairs. Both Puntland and Somaliland co-opted senior Dhulbahante and Warsangeli clan leaders by offering them high-level positions in the governments in Garowe and Hargeisa. But as the contests over the disputed territories intensified, pressure mounted on the two clans to pick sides. Political co-optation thus had a dangerous side effect, splintering the Dhulbahante and Warsangeli clans and complicating the task of managing discontent in Sool and Sanaag. That failure both catalysed the militarisation of intra-clan conflict in the region and made it easier for local spats to escalate into fighting between Somaliland and Puntland forces.

Beginning in 2007, Somaliland launched a series of military offensives to expand its authority eastward, seizing a string of towns and villages in Sool. The captured locales include Las Canod, Sool's provincial capital.

Presidents Gas and Bihi continue to invoke history and self-defined principles of territorial integrity to press their claims to Sool and Sanaag. In addition to clan ties, Puntland projects itself as a champion of a unified Somalia. In a 23 June speech in Puntland's parliament, Gas rejected the validity of colonial cartography as an arbiter of the conflict, adding it was Puntland's "sacred duty" to "liberate" the contested regions through force.¹¹ For their part, Somaliland leaders defend the British-drawn boundaries and assert their "right" to administer what they regard as sovereign territory. Sool and Sanaag, they argue, have long been part of Somaliland.¹² Both sides thus characterise the dispute in stark terms, seeming to leave little room for compromise.

¹⁰ Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°64, *Somalia: The Trouble with Puntland*, 12 August 2009.

¹¹ Voice of America (Somali), 23 June 2018.

¹² M.A. Egge, "The Somaliland army is 60-plus kilometers this side of our border": President Muse Bihi", *Horn Diplomat*, 21 January 2018.

IV. Averting War

Somalia's foreign partners appear to underestimate the risk of conflict in the north. They tend to assess the north's stability in reference to the south – a low bar that may have meant warning signs slipped under the radar. That the crisis has deteriorated almost to the point of open war speaks to a number of realities. Outside powers have mostly preferred “positive” narratives that oversell the north's recovery – and that of Somalia more broadly – and downplay risks. Leaders in both Puntland and Somaliland appear wedded to brinksmanship and believe they have little incentive to make peace. Local and international mediation systems are disjointed and mostly reactive.

A marked exception was the early warning role played by the special representative of the UN secretary-general for Somalia, Michael Keating. This, combined with Keating's shuttle diplomacy between Garowe and Hargeisa, temporarily helped de-escalate tensions. Both sides subsequently rejected his overtures.¹³ But renewed efforts by the UN envoy, with clear statements of support by the Somali government and behind-the-scenes diplomacy by influential outside powers, likely offer the best means to de-escalate the looming confrontation.

President Farmajo, to his credit, has made repeated appeals for both sides to show restraint.¹⁴ Alone he lacks sufficient leverage to persuade them to step back, particularly as his relations with both Hargeisa and Garowe are strained.¹⁵ But Farmajo's voice is important. He should continue to call on both sides to avert war, press for UN mediation and avoid giving any sense that Mogadishu supports Puntland's belligerence (his statement on 26 June 2018, Somalia's Independence Day, struck precisely the right tone).¹⁶ He also should redouble efforts to smooth his own relations with President Gas and resume dialogue with Somaliland, suspended since 2017.¹⁷

Ethiopia, arguably, is the one country with longstanding ties to and real leverage over both Puntland and Somaliland. Addis Ababa's past interventions were instrumental in brokering temporary truces.¹⁸ This time, however, Ethiopia has appeared reluctant to get involved, possibly due in part to the complexity of the crisis – its inter-

¹³ Crisis Group interviews with diplomats, Nairobi, May 2018.

¹⁴ Farmajo last encouraged the sides to ease tensions in mid-May 2018, during Ramadan. See “President Farmajo calls for end to Tukaraq fighting, appeals for dialogue”, *Goobjoog*, 15 May 2018.

¹⁵ Mogadishu's relations with Somaliland are at an all-time low since the Somali government attempted to block a deal whereby an Emirati company would develop and operate Somaliland's Berbera port. Farmajo's relations with Puntland are also rife with mistrust, with tension aggravated by the spat in the Gulf between Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and their allies, on one side, and Qatar, on the other. Puntland and other federal states expressed explicit support for the Emirati-Saudi axis, whereas Farmajo declared he preferred to stay neutral. See Crisis Group Africa Report N°260, *Somalia and the Gulf Crisis*, 5 June 2018.

¹⁶ See Tweet by @RAbdiCG Twitter account, 26 June 2018, referencing a Tweet by the office of the Somali President, <https://twitter.com/RAbdiCG/status/1011623699320049665>.

¹⁷ See Crisis Group Report, *Somalia and the Gulf Crisis*, op. cit. Mogadishu-Hargeisa relations, long strained, have deteriorated significantly since the Berbera port spat.

¹⁸ Weeks after the Tukaraq fighting, former Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn invited both Bihi and Abdiweli to Addis Ababa and brokered a ceasefire. See “An explosive ceasefire!”, *Africa Intelligence*, 2 February 2018.

and intra-clan conflicts, colonial borders and secession issues – and in part to wariness that an intervention could be perceived by Somalis as meddling and inflame anti-Ethiopian sentiment.

That said, Ethiopia's new prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, has stepped up the country's diplomatic engagement in Africa and beyond. Somali leaders and foreign diplomats largely welcomed his visit to Mogadishu in June as an ambitious but promising attempt to recalibrate Ethiopia's traditionally troubled relations with its eastern neighbour. Prime Minister Abiy has his hands full with his reform agenda, security concerns and a still unsettled transition at home, efforts to make peace with Eritrea and calls for his intervention in other regional crises, notably by bolstering Ethiopia's role in mediating South Sudan's civil war. Tasking him with resolving a conflict in northern Somalia that may appear less strategically significant might be a tough ask. But the implications of an escalation around Tukaraq for the stability of Somalia as a whole should be of concern to Addis Ababa. Prime Minister Abiy should lend his country's heft to efforts by the UN, pressing Garowe and Hargeisa to allow for a renewal of UN efforts.

The UAE, which after Prime Minister Abiy's June 2018 visit to Abu Dhabi appears to have reinvigorated its cooperation and relations with Ethiopia, and maintains close ties with both Puntland and Somaliland, could also help defuse tensions. An escalation would clearly be detrimental to Emirati interests, likely upsetting Abu Dhabi's significant investments in both Somaliland and Puntland. For now, a visible Emirati role might not make sense, given friction between Abu Dhabi and Mogadishu (though relations may improve, as some reports suggest Abiy is mediating between the Emirati and Somali governments).¹⁹ Even now, though, the UAE and other states could discretely encourage Puntland and Somaliland leaders to accept UN mediation.

The immediate goal of any mediation should be to quickly broker a truce. Parties should tone down provocative rhetoric, pull combat forces out of contested areas, particularly around Tukaraq, allow in humanitarian aid, and submit to a process of third-party mediation, without precondition, to find a longer-term solution to the dispute. One option for the latter might be the African Union Border Programme, which is part of the African Union (AU)'s Peace and Security Department and which has a full-fledged team that arbitrates and demarcates disputed borders. Though in principle this applies only to borders between states, AU officials have expressed a willingness to play a role. According to one senior AU official: "We have called on the Somali government and written a note verbale to appeal to them to utilise the AU Border Programme tool to resolve internal border disputes. If they give us a try we can turn that border into one of cooperation and not conflict."²⁰

Beside renewing its mediation efforts, the UN mission should initiate local peacebuilding efforts in both disputed areas. Such efforts should involve clerics and

¹⁹ For details of the tension between Abu Dhabi and the Farmajo government, see Crisis Group Report, *Somalia and the Gulf Crisis*, op. cit.

²⁰ Crisis Group phone interview, senior AU official, Addis Ababa, June 2018.

local clan leaders to initiate grassroots reconciliation efforts, which have helped bridge divisions and curb violence in other parts of Somalia.²¹

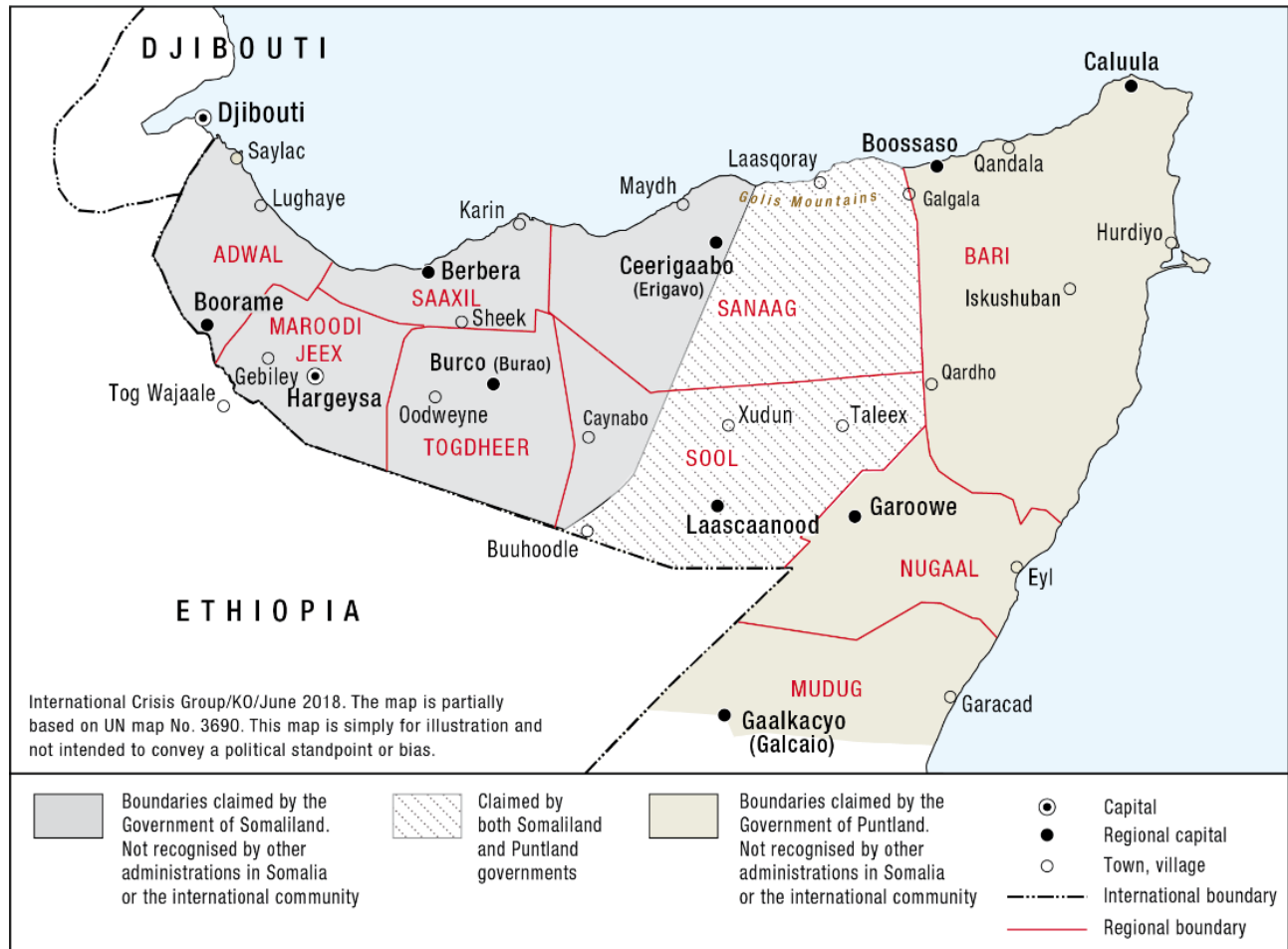
V. Conclusion

Puntland and Somaliland are sliding toward a protracted conflict with enormously destabilising consequences for not only northern Somalia but the country as a whole. War is still avoidable, but to forestall it both sides need to take a step back, dial down their rhetoric and allow for mediation led by the UN. Their long-running dispute over Soog and Sanaag regions will inevitably take time to resolve. But the priority today is for the two sides to de-escalate, arrive at some modus vivendi and accept a mechanism for determining that status. The alternative is a war in northern Somalia that would be extremely costly to both sides, tarnish their international reputations, worsen an already grave humanitarian predicament and undercut efforts to counter Al-Shabaab and the small, but deadly ISIS branch in Puntland.

Nairobi/Brussels, 27 June 2018

²¹ “A History of Mediation in Somalia since 1988”, Interpeace, May 2009; and “Community-based peace processes in South-Central Somalia”, Interpeace, July 9 2008.

Appendix A: Map of Northern Somalia



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

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Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in ten other locations: Bishkek, Bogota, Dakar, Kabul, Islamabad, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Algiers, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Hong Kong, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Mexico City, New Delhi, Rabat, Sanaa, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on Africa since 2015

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Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, Special Report N°1, 14 March 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

Seizing the Moment: From Early Warning to Early Action, Special Report N°2, 22 June 2016.

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Central African Republic: The Roots of Violence, Africa Report N°230, 21 September 2015 (also available in French).

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Burundi: anatomie du troisième mandat, Africa Report N°235, 20 May 2016 (only available in French).

Katanga: Tensions in DRC's Mineral Heartland, Africa Report N°239, 3 August 2016.

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Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis: How the Catholic Church Can Promote Dialogue, Africa Briefing N°138, 26 April 2018 (also available in French).

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