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Cameroon's Bamenda, where only the coffin trade is booming

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Image caption,
Soldiers get a proper burial - unlike many people

By Randy Joe Sa'ah

BBC News, Bamenda

Once a thriving city in Cameroon, Bamenda has been ripped of its soul by the five-year war between English-speaking secessionists and the mainly French-speaking government.

Bamenda is all but dead. Only the coffin trade is booming. Bodies are dumped regularly all over the city - in mortuaries, on streets and in rivers.

Council workers pick them up and give them a pauper's burial.

"It is a blessing to be buried at all, let alone by family and friends," says a cemetery worker as he comes to pick up 10 cheap coffins from a funeral parlour.

Demand has dropped for the once-popular elaborately designed coffins - shaped like bibles, cars or beer bottles to reflect the lifestyle, interests or last wishes of the dead.

"Coffins that used to sell for a million CFA francs [about \$1,500, £1,270] are out of commission because nobody can afford them. Most people can only afford coffins for 50,000 CFA francs," says an attendee at a funeral parlour.

The regular funerals for young men and boys are a brutal reminder of the conflict in Cameroon's English-speaking regions of North-West and South-West.

In just five years, that conflict has claimed tens of thousands of lives, while forcing more than one million to flee to French-speaking areas and a further 80,000 to take refuge in next-door Nigeria.

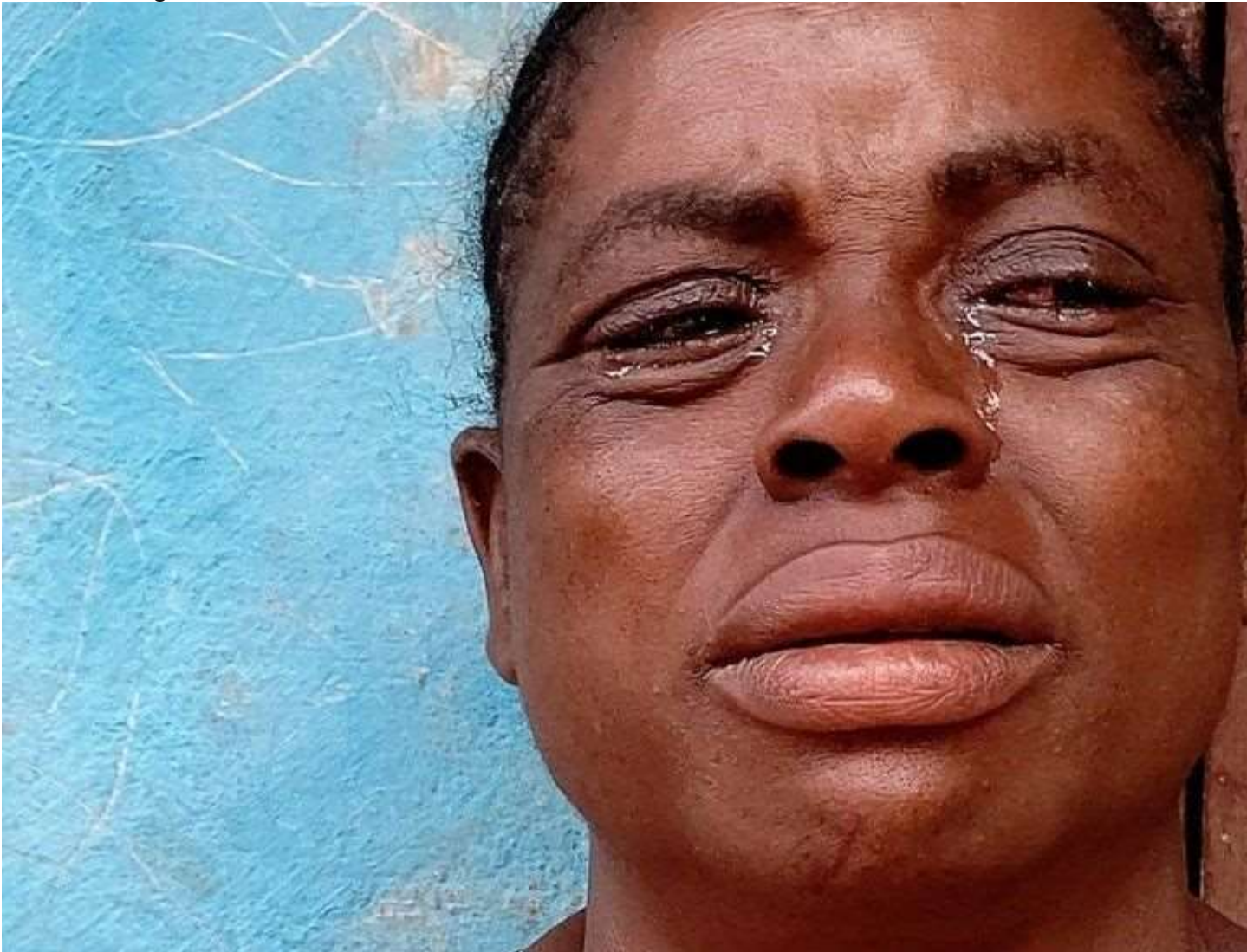


Image caption,
This woman says her child was shot by police

The war has its roots in grievances that date back to the end of colonialism, when British-controlled territory was unified with French areas to create what is now Cameroon. Many English-speaking Cameroonians have felt marginalised ever since and have opposed what they see as attempts by the government - dominated by the French-speaking majority - to force them to give up their way of life, including their language, history and education and legal systems.

Tensions boiled over in 2016 when tens of thousands of people in Bamenda and other English-speaking areas embarked on a series of protests against the use of French in their schools and courts, as well as the failure to publish government documents in English, even though it is an official language.

With the government ordering the security forces to crackdown on the protests rather than entering into talks to resolve their grievances, young men took up arms the following year to demand the independent state of Ambazonia, as they call the two English-speaking regions.

Now, military vehicles - including those with mounted machine-guns - constantly criss-cross Bamenda.

Residents say soldiers raid homes, make arrests, burn markets and even display the bodies of their victims, including commanders of militias, at major intersections to warn residents against joining the separatist fighters.

Government forces have also suffered heavy losses in the conflict, with the bodies of fallen soldiers removed from the military's mortuary in the capital, Yaoundé, every Thursday and Friday.

Widows wail in front of the long lines of coffins draped in the Cameroonian flag, before the soldiers are buried amid the pomp and ceremony that mark military funerals.



Image caption,

Civilians often end up paying the highest price of the conflict

Separatist fighters have also gained notoriety for atrocities against civilians, including beheadings and the torturing of women whom they denounce for "betraying the struggle", calling them "black legs" - a term regularly bandied about now.

They circulate videos of these atrocities to warn people of the punishment they face if they are suspected of colluding with the security forces.

On Mondays, Bamenda becomes a "ghost town" with the roads empty and markets closed - part of a civil economic disobedience campaign dating back to before the armed struggle. These days, residents who dare ignore the lockdown order are either shot dead or see their shops go up in smoke.

The military and police also disappear from the streets, so that they do not become soft targets for separatists fighters who have a strong presence in the city.

The separatists even ordered the closure of all schools four years ago as part of their campaign. A few have bravely remain open, but children do not dare wear uniforms.

The military enforces a curfew virtually every night in the city, resulting in many of its restaurants, bars and clubs - once reputed to be the best in Cameroon - going out of business, not helped by the now-erratic electricity supply.

"The constant frying of popcorn has driven everybody away," says a waitress using a metaphor to describe the never-ending sound of gunfire.

She says it has also prevented those who live abroad from coming home. Known as "bushfallers" - a Pidgin term for hunters (in this case seeking greener pastures) - those in the diaspora were responsible for Bamenda's economic heartbeat, sending back money to invest in the once-mushrooming building trade and coming back at Christmas to share their largesse.

But the authorities accused them of bankrolling the Anglophone rebellion. Visiting returnees soon found themselves arrested - some are now in the maximum security prisons of Yaoundé or Douala - while others simply disappeared. Bushfallers' money has dried up and none of them now visit.

Long-time resident Peter Shang, who once loved life in the city, says people now take one day at a time: "Life is a lottery. Too many things remind you about untimely death. You talk to someone today and tomorrow they are gone."

For Marie Clair Bisu, there is a silver lining - she sees more of her husband, because he gets home before curfew.

"He has now discovered his children. This is a man who used to come back late sometimes drunk and would just head to bed. Now he can play with the kids and check their books. This conflict has reunited us," she says.

"The only problem is that the gunshots always spoil our nights."



Image caption,

Cameroon's two English-speaking provinces are North-West and South-West

And after a night of shooting, residents have to make several calls and listen out for traffic to check the situation is safe before venturing out. Even so, gunfire has become so common in Bamenda during the day that people no longer immediately flee at the sound.

"What would we eat if we keep running? I have children to feed," a vegetable seller says.

"We simply dive for cover and get back to business when the gunshots stop."

Another woman says her child has got so used to the sound of gunfire that she knows who is shooting.

"My daughter is seven and she can tell whether the sounds are from machine guns of the army or the AK-47 rifles of 'The Boys'," she says, referring to the separatist fighters. Some nuns who I meet by a road in the city centre say they are waiting for a taxi to go to the Abangoh Orphanage.

The war has seen an explosion in unwanted teenage pregnancies, they say - with girls who have been forced to flee their homes becoming victims of sexual violence and exploitation by both sides. One angrily says: "Rape as a weapon of war is despicable." At every corner, there is evidence that the very fabric of this once-glitzy city, where piles of billowing rubbish now tumble, has been permeated by the stench and misery of what many here regard as an unnecessary war.