



World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Cameroon

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Comments In October 2015, MRG revised its *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples*. For the most part, overview texts were not themselves updated, but the previous 'Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples' rubric was replaced throughout with links to the relevant minority-specific reports, and a 'Resources' section was added. *Refworld* entries have been updated accordingly.

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Updated September 2017

Minorities and indigenous peoples

Main languages: French (official), English (official), Bamiléké, Fang, Ewondo, Kirdi, Fulfulde, Pidgin English.

Main religions: traditional beliefs (14 per cent), Christianity and syncretic Christianity (63 per cent), Islam and syncretic Islam (22 per cent), Gnostics (1 per cent).

The population of Cameroon was estimated as of July 2016 at 24.4 million: these included highlanders (grassfielders) (31 per cent); equatorial Bantu (19 per cent); Montagnards (11 per cent); Fulani / Peuhl (10 per cent); northwestern Bantu (8 per cent); and eastern Nigritic (7 per cent). Indigenous forest-dwelling hunter-gatherer peoples make up 0.4 per cent of the population: they include the Ba'Aka (around 40,000), BaKola / BaGyeli (around 3,700) and Bedzam / Bedzang.

Heavily influenced by German, British and especially French imperial interests, Cameroon is home to more than 250 ethnic groups and sub-groups, many of which spread across neighbouring countries. These can be classified in five major regional-cultural groups.

Western highlanders, also called grassfielders, form the largest of these with about 38 per cent of the population. They include the Bamiléké, Bamoun and other north-western peoples. In a region of fertile soils, Bamiléké are noted and frequently resented for their success in farming and commerce.

Southern tropical forest peoples include the Ewondo, Bulu and Fang, all of which are in the Beti cluster of peoples. Much of the country's political elite has come from the Bulu sub-group. Nomadic forest peoples, commonly referred to as 'Pygmies', eke out precarious livelihoods in the shrinking forests of the south-west and south-east. These peoples include the Ba'Aka, BaKola, BaGyeli and Bedzam. They have faced pressure from the Catholic Church and the government to settle in 'pilot villages' and along roadways, and have been exploited by logging companies to assist in the destruction of their forest environment.

Montagnards are also known as '*Kirdi*', a collective name for several non-Muslim peoples in the north who make up around 11 per cent of the total population. They outnumber the Muslim population of the north but

are much less organized politically. While the term, meaning 'infidel', has pejorative roots the name has since been adopted as a marker of ethnic and religious pride.

Islamic peoples of the northern Sahel include the Peuhl, who are cotton and rice farmers, as well as livestock herders. Peuhl elites have gained national political prominence.

Coastal tropical forest peoples include Bassa, Douala and smaller groups of the south-west.

Overlaying Cameroon's rich ethnic diversity is a split between Anglophone and Francophone Cameroon, a legacy of the country's divided colonial history. Both English and French are official languages, but Francophone Cameroonians outnumber Anglophone Cameroonians by about four-to-one.

Christians, including both Roman Catholics and Protestants, are more concentrated in the south and west. Muslims are found in all parts of the country, but more concentrated in the north. Many Christians and Muslims integrate traditional beliefs into their religious practices.

Current issues

Despite its substantial natural resources, poverty remains widespread in Cameroon. The country has been engaged in the REDD+ (reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation) process since 2005 and since 2011, at the first, capacity-building and strategy development stage, the UN-REDD programme. In this context, a seminar on indigenous peoples' rights to free, prior and informed consent and other trainings were held for representatives of some indigenous communities in 2015 and 2016. Despite such efforts, a March 2016 evaluation of the REDD+ Ngoyla-Mintom pilot project in southwest Cameroon found that the free, prior and informed consent of affected communities had not been obtained.

Cameroon is also engaged in the EU-FLEGT process against illegal logging, having signed a Voluntary Partnership Agreement in 2010. Despite the inclusion of measures to ensure transparency, access to information reportedly remains a key challenge facing the affected communities, which include Bantu as well as indigenous Bagyeli groups.

Indigenous forest-dwelling groups and nomadic Mbororo pastoralists face continued difficulties, particularly over issues around rights to land and resources. The UN Independent Expert on minority issues visited Cameroon in August 2013. While recognizing the government's efforts to protect minority rights, she emphasized that important steps are still required on behalf of both forest-dwellers and Mbororo pastoralists, particularly around issues of poverty and land rights. Following on from the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review of Cameroon, in June 2013 the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights conducted her first visit to the country to investigate issues including violence against women, harmful traditional practices and the vulnerability of indigenous peoples in the face of large-scale agro-business. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, having reviewed Cameroon's state party report, urged the authorities in 2016 to fund and implement the 2014 National Action Plan for Indigenous Peoples, particularly focusing on the areas of access to education, birth registration and identity documentation.

Cameroon has also been exposed to spill-over from conflicts and insurgencies in neighbouring countries. In 2013, for example, Cameroon saw a number of cross-border incidents from both armed Islamist group Boko Haram in Nigeria and Séléka in the Central African Republic (CAR). By the end of the year there were more than 100,000 refugees and asylum seekers in the country, primarily from the CAR, Nigeria and Chad. The threat from Boko Haram since then has intensified. Despite joint military efforts between Cameroon and Nigeria to subdue Boko Haram, it increased cross-border operations in Cameroon's rural and impoverished far north, attacking and shelling groupings of Nigerian refugees and restricting humanitarian aid efforts. It also targeted Cameroonian villages, churches and security forces, killing, wounding or displacing minority Christians and majority Muslims alike. Some of those displaced sought refuge in regional towns such as Kolofata and Mora, or in the regional capital Maroua, but as Boko Haram encroached further into Cameroon's territory, others reportedly went further south, out of danger, to Yaoundé. Scores of schools were closed in response to cross-border attacks and kidnappings, and the school buildings occupied by those fleeing Boko Haram. Community leaders reported that some young Cameroonian Muslims had been coerced into joining Boko Haram or reportedly recruited by the offer of a cash payment upon joining, a powerful

incentive in the poor region. Other sources reported serious violations of human rights by Cameroon's security forces engaged in combating Boko Haram, including arbitrary arrest, torture, enforced disappearance and unfair trial.

As of February 2017, the struggle with Boko Haram had led to an estimated 87,000 refugees, 191,000 internally displaced and 36,000 returnees in Cameroon's Far North. Due to severe funding shortfalls, the humanitarian response has not kept pace with the needs of these populations: furthermore, endemic food insecurity means that even local populations not directly affected by displacement have serious needs that are not being met. These factors contribute to ongoing tensions over access to land, water and other resources between the local host community and displaced or refugee families. In 2015 and 2016, Cameroon reportedly forcibly returned tens of thousands of Nigerian refugees. In March 2017 UNHCR, Cameroon and Nigeria signed a Tripartite Agreement setting out a legal framework for voluntary return of refugees in safety and dignity, and during a UN Security Council visit to Cameroon, national authorities reaffirmed the country's commitment to the principle of non-refoulement. However, reports of forcible returns continued to be received by UNHCR.

Various international agencies and NGOs, including International Crisis Group, have encouraged the Cameroonian authorities to engage in socio-economic development and efforts against religious radicalization in the Far North in order to combat the influence of Boko Haram. However, even as neighbouring Nigeria announced in spring 2017 major gains against the last Boko Haram strongholds on its territory, armed attacks believed to be by Boko Haram continued in Cameroon.

Insecurity in the CAR has also contributed to a large influx of displaced communities into Cameroon. February 2014 saw the beginning of a mass return to east Cameroon of Cameroonian Muslim migrants who had been living in the CAR until violence at the hands of armed Christian and animist self-defence 'anti-balaka' ('anti-machete') militias forced them to flee the country. In addition, large numbers of largely Muslim CAR refugees fled to Cameroon. During 2014, more than 187,000 CAR refugees fled to neighbouring countries. By the end of the year, UNHCR was using planning estimates for approximately 210,000 CAR refugees in Cameroon alone. Many took refuge in towns and villages somewhat inside Cameroon, away from the border, to avoid attack. By doing so they transformed a swathe of formerly majority Christian settlements into majority Muslim ones.

In some areas conflict has broken out with local residents over resources, such as access to health services and shelter. Food supplies, stretched past capacity, have caused hardship for locals and refugees alike, fuelling competition and resentment between them. Cattle-herding Peuhl (also known as Mbororo) refugees - targeted in the CAR for their perceived wealth and livestock - have also struggled to locate adequate grazing land for their cattle, at times resulting in disputes over grazing land and other resources with local farmers, who are largely Christian.

Background

Environment

Straddling the equator on the western coast of Africa, Cameroon shares a long north-western border with Nigeria, a north-eastern border with Chad, an eastern border with the Central African Republic, a south-eastern border with the Republic of Congo (Congo-Brazzaville), and southern borders with Gabon and Equatorial Guinea. The western coastal plain receives heavy rainfall and is heavily forested. Mt Cameroon, an active volcano, is the highest point in West Africa and lies along the northern coast. Other highlands extend from there, along the Nigerian border and into northern Cameroon. Central plateaus are savannah grasslands. Large areas of Cameroon have fertile soils exploited for farming and the country has modest oil reserves.

History

The first inhabitants of Cameroon were hunter-gatherer groups such as the Ba'Aka. Bantu speaking groups followed. Peuhl moved into the north of present-day Cameroon beginning late in the 18th century. The Peuhl captured many Kirdi for sale through the trans-Saharan slave trade and introduced Islam.

Europeans first arrived in the south in the 16th century, establishing trading posts along the coast and sending southerners into slavery across the Atlantic.

Germany established a protectorate of Kamerun in 1884, sparking resistance from many local peoples. The territory was divided between Britain and France after Germany's defeat in World War I under the auspices of the League of Nations. British Cameroon, in the north, was ruled from Lagos, Nigeria, while French Cameroon, which made up 80 per cent of the territory, was divided among other French colonies, with a remnant ruled from today's capital, Yaoundé. Britain abolished forced labour, but France continued to use forced labour for the production of cash crops until after World War II.

An armed rebellion against French rule, espousing Marxist ideology, erupted in 1955. The Bamiléké and Bassa ethnic groups were at the centre of the Union of the Peoples of Cameroon (UPC). The conflict continued into the post-independence era and cost many thousands of lives.

French Cameroon gained independence in 1960 as the Republic of Cameroon. The following year, the people in the northern part of British Cameroon, mostly Muslims, voted to join Nigeria in a referendum sponsored by the United Nations. The southern part of British Cameroon, home to mostly Christians, opted to join Cameroon, now called the Federal Republic of Cameroon. Under the 24-year rule of the country's first president, Ahmadou Ahidjo, a Peuhl from the north, various ethnic groups vied for power through his patronage network. Ahidjo established one-party rule in 1966, and put down the last of the UPC rebellion by 1970. A constitutional amendment in 1972 ended the federal system and renamed the country the 'United Republic of Cameroon'.

Ahidjo resigned in 1982, handing power to his prime minister, Paul Biya - an ethnic Bulu. However, Ahidjo loyalists attempted a coup two years later, and its failure led him to flee the country. In 1984, Biya changed the name of the country back to 'Republic of Cameroon' and won elections in which he was the only candidate. He has remained in power ever since. In 2008, the Cameroon parliament passed a controversial constitutional amendment removing the previous two-term limit, allowing Biya to run for a third term in 2011. While he has received over 70 per cent of the vote in the last several elections, the opposition and international observers have alleged widespread irregularities. Biya has maintained close ties with France.

President Biya's ethnic group, the Bulu, has dominated politics and the military. Beyond the exclusion of other ethnic groups, Biya has favoured Francophones over Anglophones. In the 1990s, in the face of increasing hostility and repression by central government, Anglophone pressure groups persisted in challenging their second-class status and calling for greater regional autonomy. A group called the Southern Cameroon National Council even called for the secession of the country's two southern, English-speaking provinces, and was promptly banned.

Governance

Cameroon has been run by two presidents and a single party since independence. President Paul Biya, in power for over thirty years, was most recently elected in 2011; his party retained a majority of seats in the last legislative elections, held in 2013. The President appoints governors, local officials, judges and over 60 cabinet ministers. He also oversees other elements of a vast patronage network, appointing and firing the heads of over 100 large state companies. The National Assembly has no authority, and the judiciary is subject to orders from the President's Ministry of Justice. Cameroon is reportedly greatly affected by corruption and there are no reliable guarantees of civil liberties.

The oil-rich Bakassi peninsula has long been a source of conflict with neighbouring Nigeria. In 2002 the International Court of Justice recognized Cameroonian sovereignty there, but Nigerian troops continued to occupy it until 2006.

Ahead of legislative elections in April 2013, Mbororo and traditional forest-dwelling groups as well as members of the Montagnard (also known as '*Kirdi*') minorities from the northern highlands reportedly criticized political parties for not honouring previous commitments to field minority candidates. They urged the President, who has the right to appoint some legislators, to name minority representatives.

An official study aimed at specifying criteria for identifying indigenous peoples in Cameroon is underway, but criticisms around its lack of involvement with the communities themselves have been repeatedly raised.

Minorities

- [Anglophones](#)
 - [Ba'Aka and related groups](#)
 - [Mbororo pastoralists](#)
 - [Montagnards](#)
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Contacts

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Association of Human Rights and Torture Defenders (AHURTOD)

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<http://www.cedcameroun.org>

Commission Nationale des Droits de l'Homme et des Libertés

Consortium d'Appui aux Actions pour la Promotion et le Développement de l'Afrique (CAPDA)

<http://capda.free.fr/>

Fondation Humanus (Humanus International)

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Mbororo Social and Cultural Development Association (MBOSCUDA)

<http://www.mboscuda.org/>

Forest peoples

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