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Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders: Women in Cameroon's Anglophone Conflict

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Preventing War. Shaping Peace.

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Principal Findings

What's new? The conflict in Cameroon's Anglophone regions grinds on, with 2021 proving an especially violent year. Clashes between separatists and security forces have displaced hundreds of thousands, the majority of whom are women and children. The role of women in the conflict and the harms they have experienced are under-examined.

Why does it matter? Women play active roles in the conflict. They are divided along political and geographical lines. Many support the Anglophone cause, with some fighting side by side with male insurgents, while others campaign for peace. Women and girls continue to suffer differentiated harms with too little attention directed to addressing them.

What should be done? Authorities should, with donor support, seek to better protect women from conflict-related sexual violence and do more to meet the needs of the displaced, reissuing civil papers, providing health care and offering economic relief. Government and Anglophone leaders should include women in conflict resolution and mitigation efforts.

Executive Summary

The Anglophone conflict in Cameroon, now in its fifth year, has had a profound and often devastating impact on women living in the affected regions. Whether they are displaced, raising children on their own, struggling to earn a living or all three, Anglophone women have navigated a harsh landscape of hostility and widespread sexual violence. Some have joined the insurgency, motivated by political beliefs or anger and desperation. Others have joined activists highlighting the plight of women or pressing for peace. But the government and the separatists who oppose it have largely ignored women and their concerns. The government and donors should take urgent measures to mitigate the conflict's impact on displaced women and children, many of whom have lost their civil papers or livelihoods. The government and separatists should also provide democratic space for women's groups to campaign for peace without fear of reprisal. Although no peace process exists at present, donors should begin preparing now to include women activists, especially those influential in rural areas, in talks when they do get under way.

Cameroon's Anglophone war dates to 2017, when a protest movement that sought to preserve the Anglophone legal and educational systems transformed, in the face of a government crackdown, into an armed rebellion. Women and children have suffered hugely in the resulting conflict. Hundreds of thousands of the displaced are women, and many are running households and rearing children without outside support. General strikes, lockdowns and the threat of violence have paralysed the two Anglophone regions' economies, while most infrastructure is in disrepair. Cameroon has thus far rejected external requests to shelter the displaced, mainly because setting up camps would contradict the official narrative that life in the Anglophone regions is returning to normal. Thousands of uprooted citizens are without employment, housing, civil papers or schooling for their children, all while having to negotiate their personal safety and access to basic services every day. Both separatists and soldiers use rape as a weapon of war and coerce women and girls into exploitative relations that expose them to charges of espionage.

But women are not just victims. The Anglophone revolt drew in women almost from the start, and many play roles either in active combat or as part of the separatist militias' support structure. Some women have taken up arms for political reasons. Others are seeking revenge for abuses they or their families have suffered at the security forces' hands. Indeed, women's roles in the insurgency, both as participants and as a social base, help explain its tenacity.

Cameroonian women also engage widely in peacebuilding activities. These activities are far from monolithic. Urban, high-profile women's groups easily engage with national and international institutions, while rural grassroots activists have more sway over separatist fighters but few connections with officials in Yaoundé. More broadly, women's groups span political and geographical divides, between activists who openly espouse the separatist cause and those who privately prefer federalism or simply peace. Although the government and separatists often disregard women's activism or relegate activists to narrow, single-issue politics, women, both at home

and abroad, have pressed with some success for relief measures such as reopening schools that separatist boycotts forced to close and extending the reach of humanitarian aid. They have also called for broader peace initiatives, like ceasefires and inclusive talks. As women's activism has become bolder and more prominent, the government has become less tolerant of it, and activists also face reprisals by separatists in areas where they operate.

Meanwhile, efforts at dialogue between the government and the separatists have borne little fruit, and there are few indications that the two sides are ready to compromise in the near future. At present, no peace talks are under way or even planned. But when the two sides are ready to talk, it is imperative that they invite a broad array of women to the table. A peace process that ignores women's positions would sideline a vibrant source of perspectives on the conflict, ignore key constituencies and, in all likelihood, fail to address forms of violence that particularly affect women. An inclusive peace process, on the other hand, would generate buy-in among women, who would then help build support in society at large.

In the meantime, the government should focus on taking steps to better protect women from the differentiated impact of conflict on them and their families, including by:

- ❑ Affording unfettered access to the Anglophone regions for humanitarian workers so they can bring relief to those most in need.
- ❑ Accelerating efforts to reissue identity documents and other important civil papers that displaced people have lost during the conflict.
- ❑ Extending economic support to women affected by the violence, particularly those who have been displaced, including through gender equity in planned measures such as land allocation to displaced people.
- ❑ Increasing medical and psychosocial support to sexual abuse survivors.
- ❑ Intensifying efforts to prosecute perpetrators of sexual violence.
- ❑ Allowing women activists to campaign for a peaceful resolution of the conflict without fear of reprisal.

In order for these measures to be effective, they will in many cases have to be met by corresponding steps by the separatists, who should:

- ❑ Immediately suspend any attacks on humanitarian workers.
- ❑ Take a coordinated decision to indefinitely suspend school boycotts and allow all the education centres to reopen and resume their regular activities.
- ❑ Refrain from coercing women into support roles in militia camps, such as cooking and nursing.
- ❑ Establish a coordinated mechanism to exclude from their ranks militiamen alleged to be responsible for violence or other abuses directed at women.
- ❑ Allow women activists to freely express their political views without fear of threats or retaliation, including online.

As for donor countries, multilateral organisations and NGOs – which have been rightly pushing for comprehensive negotiations to end the conflict – they can in the meantime work to support the foregoing efforts, in particular by:

- ❑ Helping repair the education system of the two Anglophone regions by rebuilding schools, recruiting teachers and facilitating displaced children's access to learning.
- ❑ Supporting economic initiatives directed at women, in particular vocational training and funding for small businesses, and pushing for women to have equal opportunities in the recovery program.
- ❑ Providing funding for improved monitoring of gender-based violence in the Anglophone regions to shed light on the problem's extent and craft an appropriate response.

Donors and other outside actors can also help prepare the ground for an inclusive peace process when the time comes by increasing support for skills training for women peacebuilders and ensuring that their assistance goes to building the capacity of rural activists as well as those in urban areas.

Taken together, these measures can help mitigate the brutal impact of Cameroon's Anglophone conflict on women and children (particularly girls) while helping women activists play the role that is their due in laying the foundations for future peace.

Yaoundé/Nairobi/Brussels, 23 February 2022

Rebels, Victims, Peacebuilders: Women in Cameroon's Anglophone Conflict

I. Introduction

The crisis in Cameroon's Anglophone regions shows no sign of abating. It was set off by a series of demands by lawyers, teachers and students in 2016, who sought to create a two-state federation that would protect the Anglophone legal and educational systems from being subsumed by their Francophone counterparts. As protests grew, the government held talks with teachers' unions to appease Anglophone public opinion but largely ignored underlying grievances, and the crisis became increasingly serious.¹

On 1 October 2017, secessionists proclaimed an independent Federal Republic of Ambazonia, as they called the North West and South West regions, the former British Southern Cameroons.² Authorities in the capital Yaoundé responded with a heavy-handed crackdown on those they perceived as secessionist sympathisers, killing dozens and arresting hundreds, which in turn spurred the formation of Anglophone militias. By the end of 2017, the crisis had degenerated into armed conflict. At least 6,000 people have died since. Insecurity and lack of access to basic services mean that 2.2 million people in the Anglophone regions, or one in two inhabitants, need humanitarian assistance, according to the UN.³ The majority of those displaced by the crisis are women and children.⁴ Far greater pressure from external actors will likely be necessary to achieve a settlement.

Crisis Group and others have repeatedly advocated for talks that might yield a political solution to the conflict.⁵ Subsequent publications will look at how this solution might be reached. This report both provides an update on the conflict and delves into one of its under-examined dimensions, namely, the roles women have played as conflict actors and peaceful activists, and the gender-differentiated harms suffered

¹ Anglophone civil society leaders declared a school boycott in January 2017, along with a general strike, also vowing to turn cities in the North West and South West into "ghost towns" to protest the imposition of Francophone practices on the regions' English Common Law system. The government promptly arrested the movement's leaders along with hundreds of Anglophones who had been protesting. Other activists fled the country or upped their demands to outright secession. On 22 September and 1 October 2017, the government quashed demonstrations calling for the two regions' independence, killing at least 68, which in turn hardened the Anglophones' resolve and spurred the formation of militias. In November 2017, President Paul Biya declared war on the emerging separatist movement, ordering the arrest of prominent Anglophone leaders in neighbouring Nigeria two months later. Crisis Group Africa Report N°272, *Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis: How to Get to Talks?*, 2 May 2019.

² Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°130, *Cameroon's Worsening Anglophone Crisis Calls for Strong Measures*, 19 October 2017.

³ Situation Report, UN Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), January 2022.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See Crisis Group Statement, "Cameroon Needs an African Cup Ceasefire", 7 January 2022; and Crisis Group Report, *Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis: How to Get to Talks?*, op. cit.

by women and girls amid the violence. Understanding how women have shaped the conflict and uniquely suffered from it can usefully inform efforts both to mitigate Cameroon's humanitarian crisis and to build an inclusive peace process capable of delivering a durable settlement. The report builds on previous Crisis Group reports on Cameroon's Anglophone conflict. It is based on over 110 interviews with government officials, separatists, Anglophone civil society representatives, women leaders and activists, diplomats, humanitarian workers, academics and researchers, conducted in Douala, Yaoundé and various localities in the North West, South West, West and Littoral regions, as well as in the diaspora, between August 2020 and January 2022.

II. Update on an Enduring Conflict

Since Crisis Group last reported on the Anglophone conflict in Cameroon, the conflict has both followed familiar patterns and intensified; the humanitarian situation has grown increasingly dire; and efforts at peacemaking have achieved little. An update on these dimensions of the conflict forms the backdrop for an exploration of the roles women have played in the conflict and peacemaking efforts, and the differentiated harms they have suffered, in Sections III and IV.

A. *The Rhythms of an Escalating Conflict*

While some patterns of violence and protest have largely persisted over the five years since the Anglophone conflict began, the past two years have also seen a marked escalation in clashes and an increased use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). The past year has been an especially bloody one in the conflict.⁶

As concerns patterns of violence, certain symbolic dates have become recurring flashpoints in the Anglophone conflict. Since 2017, separatists have attempted to block, often forcibly, celebrations of public holidays, such as 11 February (Youth Day) and 20 May (National Day), that they consider part of a repressive history.⁷ Government forces in turn typically crack down around 1 October, when separatists mark the 2017 independence declaration of what they call the Federal Republic of Ambazonia. Separatists also pressured Anglophones to boycott the disputed 7 October 2018 presidential election, in which President Paul Biya defeated Francophone rival Maurice Kamto, and the 9 February 2020 local elections. Both contests saw record low participation in the Anglophone regions.⁸ With Kamto's backers staging their own boycott of the legislative election, Biya's party has achieved a massive majority in parliament.

⁶ The warring parties killed at least 40 people in January 2021, mostly civilians. In 2021, separatists imposed a lockdown from 16 January to 7 February to disrupt the African Nations Championship, which was held in the Cameroonian cities of Limbe, Douala and Yaoundé. In June, September and December 2021, separatist militia carried out their deadliest coordinated attacks on the army, using IEDs and rocket-propelled grenades. On 14 January 2022, François Loucény Fall, head of the UN Central Africa regional office, called for a ceasefire as the Africa Cup of Nations, a second and larger football tournament, began.

⁷ In the colonial period, the North West and South West regions made up Southern Cameroons, the southern part of British Cameroons. On 11 February 1961, Southern Cameroons voted for unification with French Cameroon in a two-state federation, and every year the state marks this anniversary. The 20 May holiday commemorates the abolition of Cameroon's federation in 1972, which many Anglophones see as a root cause of conflict.

⁸ As Crisis Group has previously written about these elections, "the dispute over the 2018 presidential vote, which many observers, including the Catholic Church, criticised as flawed, continues to shape Cameroonian politics. Since electoral authorities declared him runner-up to Biya, Kamto has contested the result, culminating in his February 2019 arrest on charges of insurrection, sedition and inciting violence. Even after leaving prison in October 2019, he has regularly lambasted the government for its failure to reform the electoral system. He and his party boycotted municipal and parliamentary elections in February 2020. Their abstention left the ruling party with an overwhelming majority in parliament, meaning that the government's main rivals are not there to engage it in debate about the country's major problems". Crisis Group Africa Report N°295, *Easing Cameroon's Ethnopolitical Tensions, On and Offline*, 3 December 2020.

“Ghost town” operations became another measure of choice for the separatists from 2017 onward.⁹ These are strikes – partly spontaneous and partly enforced by separatist militias on shops, schools and taxis – that can range from one to five working days but occur most often on Mondays. Government efforts to prevent them have foundered, and the Monday strike is now a fixture in conflict regions, observed by businesses and even by government offices. In addition, separatists frequently impose general lockdowns to block all movement into and out of the Anglophone regions.¹⁰ Lockdowns tend to be more brutally enforced than ghost town operations and often motivate residents to temporarily leave the Anglophone areas. Government-imposed night-time curfews have made life even tougher. The differentiated implications of these measures for women and girls are discussed in Section IV.

With progress slow in trying to defeat the separatists, the government regularly dispatches additional troops to the two Anglophone regions, only to face fresh and equally intense militant attacks days later. In October 2020, for example, government forces launched Operation Bamenda Clean, intensifying cordon, search and pursuit operations in the city. Weeks later, however, militias resumed shooting at security forces in the area.¹¹ Soldiers have noted that militias often re-emerge shortly after they have been pushed out and their commanders killed, demonstrating the separatists’ determination and resilience.¹² In January 2021, the government announced a recruitment drive for 9,500 troops, the country’s largest-ever draft.

For their part, militias are using increasingly sophisticated weapons, including army-grade automatic rifles and rocket-propelled grenades, and planting IEDs.¹³ The period 13–19 June was the deadliest week in 2021, with about 24 combatants killed.¹⁴ In April and July, separatists attacked security forces in a Francophone region.¹⁵ On 12 and 16 September, they used IEDs and rocket-propelled grenades in three separate ambushes of army patrols, killing more than a dozen soldiers from an elite unit and destroying two armoured vehicles.¹⁶ In January 2022, unidentified individuals shot and killed a prominent opposition senator after forcing him out of his car in the city of Bamenda in the North West.

⁹ As they were announcing a school boycott in January 2017, separatist leaders also announced a general strike, vowing to turn cities in the North West and South West into “ghost towns” to protest the imposition of Francophone practices on the regions’ English Common Law system.

¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, judicial officer, February 2021, Buea; business operators, Bamenda, Buea, Limbe and Douala; women leaders, Buea and Bamenda, August 2020–April 2021.

¹¹ “Cameroon’s Anglophone crisis: Casualties from Operation Bamenda Clean continue to surface”, Pan African Visions, 30 September 2020.

¹² Crisis Group interview, senior military officer, Yaoundé, September 2019.

¹³ Crisis Group interviews, Anglophone leaders, separatist commanders, activists, aid workers, multiple locations, September 2020–September 2021.

¹⁴ “Separatist rebels kill three gendarmes in Cameroon”, *The Defence Post*, 21 June 2021; “Crise anglophone : plusieurs soldats tués en deux jours par des séparatistes”, *StopBlaBlaCam*, 20 June 2021.

¹⁵ “Cameroon says separatists disguised as military kill, loot”, VOA, 15 July 2021.

¹⁶ “Rebel attacks kill 15 soldiers in troubled Cameroon”, VOA, 20 September 2021.

B. A Social and Humanitarian Crisis

The Anglophone conflict has plunged Cameroon into its worst humanitarian crisis since independence, killing an estimated 6,000 people and destroying over 250 villages.¹⁷ The UN estimates that nearly 573,900 persons have been displaced.¹⁸ Yet Cameroonian authorities have rejected several UN and NGO requests to establish internally displaced persons (IDPs) camps where vulnerable people could be better cared for, worried that such camps would undermine the official narrative that life in the Anglophone regions is returning to normal.¹⁹

Those trying to bring relief face severe challenges. Both sides frequently block humanitarian convoys from reaching parts of the two regions, accusing aid workers of siding with their opponents. In December 2020, for instance, the government suspended emergency assistance by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in the North West, saying the organisation was not being impartial.²⁰ In August 2021, MSF withdrew its entire staff from the region. Later the same year, in December, the army stopped an MSF ambulance transferring a wounded person in need of urgent treatment in Nguti, South West.²¹ For their part, separatists frequently attack aid workers.²² Militants kidnapped at least nineteen humanitarian workers between 2020 and 2021 and have killed four others since 2019.²³

Moreover, distrust of humanitarian organisations is not limited to the two conflict parties. Widespread perceptions among Anglophones that the world has ignored

¹⁷ Death estimate from Crisis Group monitoring, analysis and interviews of local and international organisations operating in the North West and South West regions, June 2019-May 2021.

¹⁸ Many displaced people say they have not heard from their spouses or children since 2018. They often do not know whether their family members are dead or have sought refuge in the forest or elsewhere. The uncertainty is a source of enduring trauma. Crisis Group interviews, displaced Anglophones, Limbe, Yaoundé, Douala and Bamenda, August 2020-March 2021. In January 2022, OCHA published new displacement figures, counting 573,900 internally displaced persons, 71,800 refugees in Nigeria and 383,600 returnees.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, UN official and NGO staff, South West, August-September 2020 and January 2021. "Cameroonian Anglophone: The ordeal of Cameroonian Anglophone 'nomadic IDPs'", Data Cameroon, 5 February 2020; Njapdem Roger Aminkeng and Mbahpang Sixtus Alondi, "The Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon: The Role of the Government, Non-state Stakeholders and Private Donors in the Restitution of the Livelihoods of the Displaced", M.A. thesis, Aalborg University, Denmark, May 2020, p. 16.

²⁰ In 2019, MSF had six ambulances in the South West region, covering Buea, Muyuka and Kumba. Crisis Group interviews, aid worker, September 2019; local NGO leader, Yaoundé, February 2021; diplomat, Yaoundé, May 2021. "NW region: Gov't suspends DWB, medical facilities partnership despite strides", The Humanitarian Watch, 21 December 2020.

²¹ "MSF statement following incident at Nguti checkpoint", Médecins Sans Frontières, 27 December 2021.

²² In July, August and November 2020, suspected separatists kidnapped and killed three aid workers in separate incidents in the two regions. Aid workers allege that security forces have snatched patients with bullet wounds out of ambulances. Crisis Group interviews, local humanitarian organisation staff, Yaoundé, September 2020 and February 2021. "Recurrent attacks against humanitarian workers in Cameroon's crisis-hit regions by warring parties is unacceptable", CHRDA, 16 July 2020; "North West: Residents express concerns as government suspends key Doctors Without Borders partnerships", Mimi Mefo Info, 10 December 2020.

²³ "Cameroon: Four aid workers killed in restive Anglophone regions since 2019", Agence Cameroon Presse, 19 August 2021.

the conflict have fuelled resentment of foreign aid workers. Many displaced people are disappointed with what they perceive as the UN's inaction.²⁴ Suspicions among victims that foreign actors must have a hidden agenda are further poisoning the environment for humanitarian workers.

Journalists are experiencing similar problems. Both sides suspect media coverage of being biased. The government, which does not want its abuses reported or the separatists' victories publicised, leaves journalists at risk of abuse by security forces, while separatists regularly abduct reporters for ransom, issue death threats when they cover army activities and destroy their equipment. "I was kidnapped by separatist fighters once for championing a back-to-school campaign in 2019 and arrested seven times by Cameroon's security forces", said one journalist.²⁵ In August 2019, police arrested journalist Samuel Wazizi in the South West, accusing him of criticising the government's handling of the conflict. He later died in detention.²⁶ Partly as a result of such ill treatment of journalists, media attention to the conflict is limited, which in turn complicates fundraising by domestic and foreign humanitarian organisations.²⁷

With conflict victims receiving neither the assistance nor the attention that they should, many of the displaced have to fend for themselves. The majority remain in Cameroon, often within Anglophone areas, where public services are in disrepair. Those who have moved to Francophone regions are competing for scarce resources with locals, especially in the neighbouring West and Littoral regions, and many, lacking access to land or capital, are forced to rely on the charity of those regions' residents.²⁸ Still others have managed to leave the country. The UN has registered 71,800 Anglophone refugees in Nigeria, while a smaller number has settled in Ghana. Some Cameroonians have crossed the Mediterranean Sea into Europe or made it to the U.S. via dangerous routes in Latin America.²⁹

Identification documents are another concern. Many displaced people have lost important civil papers, including birth certificates and identity cards, and are confronted with steep bureaucratic hurdles when trying to get new documents. Without papers, many either have to pay for forged documents or bribe their way through checkpoints. Humanitarian organisations are aware of the problem, but efforts to remedy it have thus far proven insufficient and are sometimes thwarted by corrupt government officials.³⁰

The conflict has also had a devastating impact on education. As noted above, in 2017, as protesters in the two Anglophone regions rallied against the French language's dominance in schools, unions and civil society organisations called for a school boy-

²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, displaced persons, North West, South West and Littoral regions, August 2020 and January-March 2021.

²⁵ Crisis Group interview, journalist, Bamenda, November 2020.

²⁶ "Cameroonian journalist Samuel Wazizi dies in gov't detention", Al Jazeera, 5 June 2020.

²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, local NGO workers, Buea and Bamenda, January-March 2021.

²⁸ Crisis Group interviews, civil society leader and government minister, Yaoundé, January-March 2021.

²⁹ "English speakers from Cameroon are joining Syrian refugees on migrant boats", PRI, 27 April 2017. Under President Donald Trump, the U.S. stepped up deportations of Anglophone Cameroonians seeking asylum in the U.S. "Trump allies in Americas block Africans' path to US asylum", Associated Press, 3 March 2020.

³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian workers, January-March 2021.

cott. Though popular at first, the boycott gradually lost support as separatist militants began destroying schools and killing teachers who did not stop working. By 2018, an estimated 4,000 Anglophone schools had closed, eventually depriving over 600,000 children of regular classes for almost four academic years.³¹ The boycott proved counterproductive, as many parents ended up sending their children to bilingual schools in Francophone regions. In September 2020, separatists called off the school boycott under pressure from Anglophone civil society, especially women's groups. Attendance has improved somewhat since, but the violence has left about 70 per cent of schools in the Anglophone regions only partly operational.

To date, the most ambitious program Yaoundé has crafted to tackle the socio-economic impact of the Anglophone conflict is the two-year Presidential Plan for the Reconstruction and Development of the North West and South West Regions.³² Launched in April 2020, the plan requires \$165 million for its first phase. The government pledged to provide 10 per cent of this budget and to seek the remainder from international partners, while the UN Development Programme (UNDP) is to manage the funds. The plan aims to offer relief to conflict victims with the construction of 105 schools, 45 health centres and 155 solar-powered water points. It will also distribute farmland and agricultural tools as well as reissue identity and other documents for 30,000 people.

The plan is controversial, however. Separatists oppose it, while many other Anglophones consider it premature and suspect that the government is trying to suggest the conflict is drawing to a close.³³ Consultations with Anglophones were limited to a few NGO leaders and shrouded in secrecy due to security concerns.³⁴ The government did not confer with several of the prospective donors while it was formulating the plan or incorporate their concerns after they had seen the draft.³⁵ When Yaoundé asked business leaders for contributions in May 2021, few were prepared to give money.³⁶ Observers believe that some separatists may eventually support elements of the plan, however, especially if the government rebuilds housing rather than public infrastructure.³⁷

International partners are faced with a dilemma. Amid constant accusations of bias by both sides, many at the UN, as well as present and potential donors, worry

³¹ Crisis Group interviews, Catholic education official, Buea, September 2002; women leaders, Buea, Bamenda, Yaoundé and Limbe, January-March 2021. "Cameroon – The Education Crisis in the North West and South West Regions", ACAPS, 19 February 2021.

³² The plan focuses on three priority areas: restoration of social cohesion; reconstruction and rehabilitation of basic infrastructure; and revitalisation of the economy.

³³ Crisis Group interviews, separatist leader, Yaoundé, May 2021; displaced and affected persons, Buea and Bamenda, August-March 2021.

³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, local NGO coordinator, Yaoundé, May 2021; senior government official, Yaoundé, February 2021.

³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, Yaoundé, May 2021. Prime Minister Joseph Dion Ngute held a meeting with diplomats in Yaoundé in December 2019 to "gather their concrete proposals for the financing of the Reconstruction and Recovery Plan". "Cameroon gathers partners around torn Anglophone region's reconstruction plan", *Business in Cameroon*, 9 December 2019.

³⁶ "Anglophone regions' reconstruction plan: GICAM pledges XAF1.2 bln support but issues conditions", *Business in Cameroon*, 19 May 2021.

³⁷ Crisis Group interview, female separatist militia member, Bamenda, October 2020.

that their support for the plan could give succour to those in government who see no need for a political settlement. Like some Anglophone leaders, external partners fear that the government could use the plan to claim the conflict is over.³⁸ Furthermore, the plan's focus on development, rather than humanitarian assistance, may incite armed opposition, making an already dangerous operating environment for humanitarian agencies even more so. Many countries that the government approached are therefore hesitant to provide funds.³⁹

C. Recent Efforts at Dialogue and Peacemaking

Although there seems to be little prospect that the Anglophone dispute will be resolved by force, efforts to achieve a ceasefire or political settlement through talks have yielded only minor successes to date.

In 2019, Switzerland's foreign ministry initiated a rare effort to broker talks, saying it had obtained the green light from the Cameroonian government and some separatists to facilitate dialogue.⁴⁰ The UN, U.S. and UK endorsed the initiative, and a dozen separatist leaders visited Switzerland several times to lay the groundwork for negotiations. Two major separatist groups refused to back the talks, however, and the government finally did not support it, preferring to go ahead with a national dialogue instead.⁴¹

The government organised what it called a Grand National Dialogue from 30 September to 4 October 2019 in Yaoundé, ostensibly to find a way out of the conflict. It invited only those opposition and government officials who did not vigorously oppose the decentralised unitary state structure, however, excluding separatist leaders from the discussions.⁴² As a result, the meeting was largely a government affair with few pertinent Anglophone voices in the room to be heard. As the dialogue entered its second day on 1 October, thousands of people in rural areas under separatist control gathered to celebrate what they called Ambazonia's independence day, illustrating the political divide between Yaoundé and the Anglophone population.⁴³ Separatists stepped up attacks soon thereafter.

Chief among the dialogue participants' recommendations was that the government grant each of the two Anglophone regions special status under Cameroon's

³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian workers, Buea and Yaoundé, December 2020–January 2021.

³⁹ As of July 2021, Japan is the only country to provide funds. On 18 February 2021, its ambassador to Cameroon pledged \$2.8 million for water projects, health centres and two schools in the South West. Cameroon government officials hope that other donors will join once the plan has proven its worth. Crisis Group interviews, government officials, UN staff and diplomats, Yaoundé, August 2020–May 2021.

⁴⁰ The ten separatist groups that agreed to these talks formed the Ambazonia Coalition Team in September 2019 in Montreux, Switzerland. The coalition included major militias such as the Interim Government-Sako Faction and SOCADEF.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, government aide, Yaoundé, October 2019 and September 2020.

⁴² Crisis Group Statement, "Cameroon's Anglophone Dialogue: A Work in Progress", 26 September 2019. Separatists requested talks on neutral ground, where they would be safe from persecution. Absent any such guarantees, Anglophone leaders outside Cameroon questioned the government's good faith. Further, the authorities did not permit the separatist leaders detained in Yaoundé (Sisiku Ayuk Tabe and nine others) to attend.

⁴³ "Cameroon separatists celebrate independence as dialogue is held", VOA, 2 October 2019.

decentralisation law, which requires Yaoundé to consult regional authorities, or assemblies, on educational matters.⁴⁴ Other proposals aimed to enforce the country's bilingual character.⁴⁵ President Biya introduced the special status for the two regions in December 2019 with the creation of two regional assemblies with limited powers; he also enacted Cameroon's first law formalising its status as a fully bilingual country. For their part, Anglophones argued that these measures failed to sufficiently protect their minority language, as officials nationwide were still allowed to use French in judicial and administrative documents. Despite their objections, the government, having endorsed the measures, dismissed the need for further talks.⁴⁶

On 23 March 2020, following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, UN Secretary-General António Guterres called for a global ceasefire to allow governments and multilateral agencies to control the virus and grant reprieve to millions of people facing violence and displacement.⁴⁷ Two days later, the Southern Cameroons Defence Forces (SOCADEF), one of the main separatist militias, said it would observe a temporary ceasefire. Other militias were more sceptical, asking for UN monitoring or a government pledge to suspend its military campaign as well. About two weeks later, SOCADEF clashed with the national army at Ediki in the South West region, ending its brief commitment to a truce.⁴⁸

The government soon launched a new initiative. On 16 April 2020, intelligence chief Maxime Eko met separatist leader Sisiku Ayuk Tabe, who had proclaimed himself interim president of the two regions in 2017 and was sentenced to life imprisonment in Yaoundé's maximum-security facility two years later.⁴⁹ Together with three other imprisoned separatist leaders, they discussed conditions for talks, holding a follow-up meeting in July 2020. The separatists demanded the release of Anglophone prisoners, the army's return to the barracks, a ceasefire declaration and negotiations to be held outside Cameroon. But a hardline government faction intervened, angrily objecting to the separatists' terms when the media published details of the second meeting. The government responded by dismissing news of the talks as un-

⁴⁴ The government introduced decentralisation in a constitutional reform in 1996, creating regional councils, partly a result of increased Anglophone demands for autonomy. But then authorities waited a full 24 years after the law passed to actually bring the councils, called assemblies in the Anglophone regions, into being. Under the new "special status" introduced in December 2019, the government is to consult the assemblies on educational matters. A government official appointed by Yaoundé must then validate the assemblies' activities.

⁴⁵ Many Anglophones prefer a policy that limits the use of French in state affairs in the Anglophone regions.

⁴⁶ "René Emmanuel Sadi : 'Nous n'entrevoyons pas de dialogue plus inclusif que celui historique qui vient d'avoir lieu'", CRTV, 19 October 2019.

⁴⁷ "COVID-19: UN chief calls for global ceasefire to focus on 'the true fight of our lives'", UN News, 23 March 2020. For more on Guterres' initiative and its fate, see Crisis Group Commentaries, "Global Ceasefire Call Deserves UN Security Council's Full Support", 9 April 2020; and "Salvaging the Security Council's Coronavirus Response", 4 August 2020.

⁴⁸ "Mixed reception to call for Covid-19 ceasefire in Cameroon's Anglophone regions", RFI, 27 March 2020.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Anglophone leaders, government aides, April 2020.

founded and ceasing all contact with the jailed separatists, dashing embryonic hopes for progress.⁵⁰

Frustrated with the government's refusal to hold meaningful talks and angered by reports of mounting human rights violations, foreign lawmakers became more vocal. On 2 January 2021, the U.S. Senate issued a bipartisan resolution calling for a ceasefire, sanctions on human rights violators and a discussion of Cameroon's conflict at the UN Security Council, while the State Department announced visa sanctions in June 2021.⁵¹ On 1 March, a subcommittee of the Canadian parliament likewise recommended sanctions on Cameroonian human rights violators. Members of parliament in the UK, France and Germany, as well as the European Union (EU), have criticised their governments for failing to take serious action to end Anglophones' suffering.⁵² On 25 November, the European Parliament passed a resolution calling on the government and separatists to agree to a humanitarian ceasefire and restart peace talks. These foreign legislators' concern shows the influence of Cameroonian campaigners abroad and reflects a growing international consensus that outside powers should exert greater pressure on the warring parties.

The Vatican has also offered to help resolve the conflict. In January 2021, Pope Francis dispatched Cardinal Pietro Parolin with an offer of support. On 29 January, Parolin asked President Biya to allow the church to act as an arbitrator. While Biya reportedly said he welcomed the Vatican's arbitration offer, there is no evidence thus far that the meeting has led to concrete action.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Anglophones, various locations, August 2020. Other dialogue initiatives had little impact. In July 2019, for example, the Africa Forum, a group of former African leaders, announced plans to discuss possible resolutions to the Anglophone conflict the following April, but did not follow through. The Cameroonian NGO Coalition for Dialogue and Negotiations organised what it called the International Conference on the Armed Conflict in Southern Cameroons in late 2020. This virtual conference was meant to find consensus among Anglophones.

⁵¹ "Risch: Accountability for Tragedies in Cameroon is Good First Step", U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 7 June 2021.

⁵² Crisis Group interview, French MP, March 2021.

III. Women's Roles in the Conflict

As the conflict in Cameroon has evolved, so has the range of roles that women have played in it. Some have joined the Anglophone insurgency in combat roles or are supporting the fight through other means. By contrast, other women have become peaceful activists – working at both the local and national levels to quell fighting or promote their vision for long-term resolution of the conflict. An understanding of these roles may help better equip potential peacemakers for success as they seek to guide the parties to inclusive peace talks and bring the conflict to an end.

A. *A Patriarchal Baseline*

While the Anglophone conflict has thrust women into new roles, and created new challenges for them, it occurs against a baseline of longstanding inequality and a highly patriarchal society.⁵³

Economic inequality is entrenched by customary law, which mostly bars women from inheriting land and other property, undermining their immediate and long-term economic security. Government practices also discriminate against women in land allocation.⁵⁴ Although they are often the main breadwinners in households, women, particularly those who are single, divorced or widowed, have low social status.⁵⁵ They thus face significant traditional and administrative barriers to economic independence, ranging from limited access to land and capital to a lack of employment opportunities in the formal sector.⁵⁶

Cameroon has taken steps to address these problems, but they have been largely ineffective. The ministry for women's empowerment and the family, created in 1984, is the repository of the country's gender engagement and expertise, but it is underfunded and has little power within government.⁵⁷ It is perhaps best known for handing out new clothing on International Women's Day, an activity it carries out with pomp. (An Anglophone civil society consortium promoted a boycott of Women's Day events in the Anglophone regions in 2017. Since then, separatists have violently enforced the boycott.)⁵⁸ Tellingly, among all the bodies the government has set up as

⁵³ Gender inequality is engrained in a variety of ethnic cultures. The complex gender coding woven into Cameroon's social fabric bestows greater power and authority on men. Women are typically constricted to maternal duties, while men are seen as decision-makers who have to protect their families and communities from harm.

⁵⁴ Lawrence F. Fombe et al., "Securing Tenure for Sustainable Livelihoods: A Case of Women Land Ownership in Anglophone Cameroon", *Éthique et économique*, vol. 10, no. 2 (2013).

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, displaced people in Anglophone regions, August 2020–March 2021.

⁵⁶ Approximately 3 per cent of women live in a house which they nominally own but for which they have no deed, making them vulnerable to eviction, while just 1.6 per cent have a house with a deed in their name. At the same time, women make up 71.6 per cent of all informal agricultural workers. Data on gender equality in Cameroon, OCHA, 23 October 2019.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interviews, government officials, Limbe, Buea, Yaoundé, Bamenda and Douala, August 2020–April 2021.

⁵⁸ The consortium said the government shows no concern for women's suffering, as it did not address the allegations of rape and other abuses of women during demonstrations in the Anglophone regions in previous years. "Consortium's call for ghost towns thwarts International Women's Day celebrations in Southern Cameroons", Bareta News, 9 March 2017; "International Women's Day na

part of its response to the Anglophone crisis, the ministry is a member of none.⁵⁹ The ministry also runs women's empowerment centres in large towns, some of which have provided job training and distributed aid to women in the Anglophone regions, but only on a small scale. Women at one centre reported that they are required to pay about \$100 to attend courses. The money can be difficult for them to find.⁶⁰

The ministry is formally responsible for implementing the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda created under UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and reports annually to the UN Commission on the Status of Women. In 2017, Cameroon produced its first national WPS action plan, which was to go into effect between 2018 and 2020. The plan meant to train 500 women conflict mediators; end impunity for sexual and gender-based violence in conflict; stop any more such violence; and conduct advocacy within government for conflict prevention. Written a few months before the Anglophone crisis turned violent, the plan did not fully consider the possibility of armed conflict in the two regions. In a review of the plan in 2021, women leaders noted that the government had done little to achieve its aims.⁶¹

Cameroon also, in 1994, ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, from which officials and activists often quote when speaking about women's rights. Notwithstanding work by civil society to press for domestic legislation fulfilling the Convention's provisions, that process is incomplete.⁶² A 2016 law criminalised practices like female genital mutilation and "breast ironing" (artificially flattening pubescent girls' breasts to prevent male attention), expanded punishment for rape and outlawed child marriage, marking significant progress, at least on paper. There is little to suggest that the law is widely enforced, however.

In politics, women struggle for adequate local and national representation: decision-makers often relegate their views and concerns to side discussions, alongside those of "youth". Women holding public office remain the exception at most levels of government, including mayors of local councils, heads of administrative divisions, regional governors and council presidents.⁶³ In the Anglophone regions, the number of

'Black Friday' for woman dem for North West and South West Cameroon – SNWOT", BBC, 8 March 2019. On 8 March 2018, a bomb exploded during a government-led Women's Day ceremony in Bamenda, killing one soldier and wounding eight others. Officials blamed the attack on separatists. "8 injured in Bamenda Women's Day attack", Cameroon News Agency, 8 March 2020.

⁵⁹ Presidential decree number 2018/719, 30 November 2018.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interview, women's centre official, South West, August 2021.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interviews, women civil society leaders, March-April 2021.

⁶² "List of issues and questions in relation to the combined 4th and 5th periodic reports of Cameroon", UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, CEDAW/C/CMR/Q/4-5, 2 August 2013.

⁶³ Only one of the country's 58 administrative divisions is headed by a woman, while all ten regional governors as well as all ten regional council presidents are male. Women are underrepresented in leadership of state institutions across the country and their share has probably declined in the Anglophone regions due to the conflict. "Leadership féminin au Cameroun : Des reculades troublantes", Viviane Ondoua Biwolé, 2 March 2021. Although the electoral code requires local council party lists to reserve 30 per cent of positions for women, only 11 per cent, or 39 of 360 councils nationwide, have female mayors. "Women mayors: Moving towards better days", *Cameroon Tribune*, 5 August 2020; "List of women mayors in Cameroon", *Cameroon Tribune*, 6 August 2020. Women head four of 65 Anglophone councils: the North West now has one female mayor (compared to three before

female mayors, already low before the conflict, has further decreased since it started as civic participation has become more dangerous; at present, only four of 65 Anglophone mayors are women. Parliament has far better women's representation, with women occupying 31 per cent of seats, but it wields limited influence in national politics. Thus far, for instance, it has refused to discuss the Anglophone conflict.

B. Women as Rebels

The insurgency drew in women almost from the start. The Anglophone campaigners' response to the 2017 government crackdown – the formation of armed groups – largely reflected cross-cutting community sentiment. Men who decided to join militias were often encouraged by women to do so.⁶⁴ Maternal validation carries significant cultural weight in the two Anglophone regions, and marriage, friendship and filial ties between men in combat roles and women anchored support for the revolt among Anglophones.⁶⁵ “Some of the women in the hinterlands have already absorbed the separatist cause and see the formal military as the enemy”, said one interviewee. “Thus, they wilfully and proudly encourage their children to join the non-state armed groups since they see [such groups] as their own new country's army”.⁶⁶ Conversely, some militiamen who have withdrawn from combat did so because their mothers asked them to.⁶⁷

Women who themselves joined the revolt cite a number of reasons for doing so. Some are politically committed to separatism. Others are driven by anger or a desire for revenge. For instance, after security forces brutally suppressed a fee protest at the University of Buea in November 2016, torturing and sexually abusing several female students, at least one abuse victim joined the Red Dragons separatist militia in Lebi-alem in the South West region.⁶⁸ In another case that occurred in the same province, a girl from Kumba who had witnessed the killing of two family members and the rape of another took up arms as a separatist.⁶⁹ Still others are coerced to join the cause or see it as a survival strategy, especially those who have fled to areas under separatist control.

Militia camps give only a rough indication of the number of women rebels. In a camp near the North West regional capital, Bamenda, for example, there are about

the conflict), while the South West has three of 34 mayors. “Cameroon – North West Region gets third female mayor”, Sisterspeak23, 9 February 2016.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interviews, separatist fighters, women leaders, North West, South West and Littoral regions, August 2020–April 2021.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interviews, woman community leader in Ndian Division, displaced women in Littoral region, Douala, January–March 2021.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, woman who lost her office job in the crisis and whose two brothers were killed in the conflict, one by soldiers and the other by separatists, October 2020.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ “Governor blames VC for rape, torture of students”, *Cameroon Post*, 10 December 2016. Crisis Group interview, separatist activist, UK, April 2021. Some women at the separatist militia camp near Bamenda say they joined to get revenge for the army's atrocities, such as killings of family members and burning of villages. Crisis Group interviews, displaced woman, separatist fighter, Bamenda, October 2020–April 2021.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interview, government officer, Buea, March 2021.

175 women and girls among a total population of 700.⁷⁰ In other camps, women are said to make up about 10 per cent of the population.⁷¹ But numbers likely fluctuate, given the conflict's fluidity and the militias' evolving needs.

Women rebels play a variety of roles. Some engage directly in combat.⁷² More often, they serve in support roles, including intelligence gathering and logistics, though some are forced to cook or nurse injured fighters in militia camps.⁷³ Women in the diaspora also wield significant influence: the separatist militia SOCADEF is reportedly partly controlled by a woman in the U.S.⁷⁴ Some women activists in the diaspora raise funds for the Anglophone cause and for displaced people requiring assistance in Cameroon and in Nigeria.⁷⁵

In November 2018, the government launched a disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) program to coax militants away from the insurgency, but while the two DDR centres it created in Buea (South West) and Bamenda (North West) both host a small number of women, neither facility makes special provision for women's needs. Women constitute about 9 per cent of the residents at the Bamenda centre and under 5 per cent at Buea.⁷⁶ Some women have become pregnant and given birth during their stay. The government is constructing a larger DDR facility in each of the two regions, but it remains to be seen whether either camp will address the specific needs of female residents.

While it would be difficult to isolate a single reason for the gap in gender-sensitive DDR programming, it mirrors a similar gap in the composition of the body that oversees programming. The management board of the National DDR Committee comprises members from fourteen ministries and a government agency, the National Commission for the Promotion of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism. As indicated above, the ministry of women's empowerment and the family, which leads implementation of Cameroon's WPS agenda, is not included.⁷⁷

C. Women and Peaceful Activism

Paradoxically, as authorities silenced the larger, male-led civil organisations in the Anglophone regions, making it increasingly dangerous for men to criticise the government or advocate for peace, the advocacy space for women's groups gradually expanded, allowing them to thrive, at least for a period of time.⁷⁸ Both sides in the conflict tended to view women's activism as politically irrelevant; the patriarchal perception that women are naturally inclined to peace allowed them to organise

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interviews, militant, aid worker, Bamenda, October-November 2020.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interviews, separatist militia member, humanitarian worker, Bamenda, October 2020.

⁷² Crisis Group interviews, Rapid Intervention Battalion soldier and gendarme, September-October 2020.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, Anglophone journalist, Yaoundé, August 2020.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interviews, U.S.-based separatist women's group leader, February 2021; journalist, Yaoundé, August 2020.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interviews, staff serving at DDR centres, Buea and Bamenda, August 2021.

⁷⁷ Presidential decree no. 2018/719, 30 November 2018.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interviews, civil society leaders, Buea, January 2021.

undisturbed.⁷⁹ Sometimes, women drew on traditional female secret societies (called *takumbeng* in the North West region) that allow elderly women to publicly shame male leaders who are considered responsible for injustices.⁸⁰

Women's peaceful activism has taken various forms and served various purposes since it emerged early on in Cameroon's conflict. In some cases, women have led peaceful advocacy efforts in support of secession. Anglophone women held their own demonstrations as part of a pro-secession campaign on 22 September and 1 October 2017 in front of the UN's headquarters in New York, in foreign capitals such as London, Abuja, Pretoria, Ottawa and Brussels, and throughout the Anglophone regions. Many have employed protest tools from local culture specific to their gender like the *takumbeng*.⁸¹ Women lead Anglophone associations and campaign groups in Europe and North America.⁸²

Women's groups have also played a small but important role in mobilising communities to help reduce violence and mitigate its effects. They promote intercommunal dialogue, host victims, push for skills training for small business owners, and liaise with churches and social groups that deal with gender-specific issues such as sexual health.⁸³ Some women's groups provide safe spaces for women to discuss their experiences.⁸⁴

In addition, women activists have engaged directly with the government, separatist leaders and diplomatic missions to raise awareness of the suffering inflicted on civilians and advocate for steps to reduce it. When a small group of women leaders travelled to the U.S. in August 2018 to ask separatists living there to end the school boycott, their efforts contributed to a shift in policy that eventually led some schools to reopen and militias to stage fewer attacks on the schools that were operating.⁸⁵

There are also divisions among women's groups, which reflect broader social cleavages that in turn inform organisations' priorities, their views on what peace should look like and the terms in which they couch their demands. While urban civil society organisations, which tend to be well versed in Western NGO jargon, have had some success in putting the global spotlight on women's suffering, such groups are often disconnected from grassroots organisations that are considerably less visible in the

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interviews, civil society, women leaders, Bamenda, February 2021.

⁸⁰ The *takumbeng* came to prominence during pro-democracy riots in Cameroon in the 1990s, when women took part in protests calling for a national conference in 1991 and formed a cordon around opposition leader John Fru Ndi's home in Bamenda to prevent his arrest following an electoral dispute in 1992.

⁸¹ Jacqueline-Bethel Tchouta Mougoué, "Gender in Cameroon's anglophone crisis", Africa is a Country, 23 June 2019.

⁸² Crisis Group interviews, Yaah Maggie Kilo and other Anglophone women leaders in-country and abroad, January-May 2021.

⁸³ Crisis Group interviews, women leaders, U.S. and Cameroon, August 2020-April 2021. In Meme division, for example, women provided sanitary pads and health training to displaced people in the bush.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ In announcing the policy change on the school boycott, separatist leaders cited the concerns women had expressed. They allowed children to attend school at their parents' discretion, all the while citing the risk of students getting caught up in violence. Crisis Group interview, University of Buea researcher, Buea, August 2020.

media.⁸⁶ But those grassroots organisations include rural women who are key influencers in the villages and small towns where militias operate. They often know militiamen personally – some are their sons – and they can persuade fighters to refrain from harassing or attacking civilians. “Grassroots women generally have direct access to armed separatists”, the head of a girl’s empowerment initiative told Crisis Group.⁸⁷ “This is extremely useful. Urban women do not usually have this kind of access”.

Activists also differ in their views on whether women’s groups should challenge the government or try to cooperate with it – and, in a related question, whether their base should be limited to Anglophone regions or be wider. The most influential advocacy group to have emerged to date is the South West and North West Women’s Task Force (SNWOT), a coalition of over 30 small women-led NGOs and associations formed in June 2018. SNWOT started as an inclusive organisation, expecting its members to be politically tolerant.⁸⁸ Yet discord emerged over the inclusion of Francophone women’s groups, whom some in SNWOT accused of being too close to Yaoundé.

Tensions within SNWOT motivated several splits. Some women established the Cameroon Women’s Peace Movement (CAWOPEM) in August 2019, which meant to include women from all of Cameroon’s ten regions to distinguish itself from SNWOT’s Anglophone-only approach. In reality, however, CAWOPEM remains active mostly in the Anglophone regions. Another split occurred when activists formed a new organisation based solely in the South West, citing the predominance of North West representation in SNWOT, and thus reviving intra-regional rivalries that have frequently beset Anglophone movements. Still another group, Mothers of the Nation, also aims to represent women nationwide. Linked to the political opposition in the capital, it is critical of the government but attached to national unity and thus opposed to secession.⁸⁹

Perhaps the biggest divide among women separates those in the diaspora, many of whom openly back secession, from those in Cameroon who, concerned that calls for secession are illegal, frame their advocacy in more moderate terms. This gap has resulted in divergent views about what peace should look like. For example, the leader of the diaspora-based NGO Takumbeng Global seeks peace in a framework that provides a safe homeland for women from the two Anglophone regions and removes Cameroonian soldiers from positions where they can inflict violence upon women; the group’s positions thus lean toward separatism. CAWOPEM, on the other hand, seeks to defend the rights of all Cameroonian women in conflict situations and takes no stance on the Anglophone question. In July 2021, several women’s groups organised a national peace convention, bringing together over a thousand women in Yaoundé. The convention called for women’s participation in conflict resolution without specifying the Anglophone conflict as an area of focus, due to concerns about preserving relations with the government.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interviews, university researcher, UN staff, Bamenda, October 2020–August 2021.

⁸⁷ Crisis Group interview, civil society leader, Buea, October 2020.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interviews, women leaders, August 2020–April 2021.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interview, female political leader, Kah Walla, Douala, January 2021.

⁹⁰ See the website of the National Women’s Convention for Peace in Cameroon.

Women's activism has not gone unchallenged. As mentioned above, while women initially had greater latitude for activism than their male civil society counterparts, that has diminished over time. As women activists became more prominent, they have also come in for criticism and intimidation. When women began to assert themselves as bona fide independent activists, the conflict parties grew more hostile to their campaigns. As SNWOT issued statements accusing security forces of killing civilians and criticising the government's refusal to speak with separatists, government officials called its members "mothers of separatists" at an event in Bamenda in September 2018.⁹¹ In another incident in May 2019, police tried to arrest women who, after joining an apparently rented crowd of handclappers (ie, individuals paid to show support), demanded a meeting with Prime Minister Joseph Dion Ngute to press for a ceasefire and peace talks.⁹²

In 2019, women in SNWOT also spoke out against kidnappings, school arsons, lockdowns and murders of women by separatists.⁹³ Separatists responded by threatening to kidnap or kill them.⁹⁴ More recently, separatists and other unidentified individuals used online platforms to threaten women leaders and other activists raising their voices against human rights violations.⁹⁵

Still, SNWOT has continued to be vocal. In October 2020, after gunmen slaughtered eight schoolchildren in Kumba and wounded thirteen others, SNWOT accused both the government and separatists of allowing the conflict to drag on in a statement that said:

We have endured the excesses of your actions for over four years now. We have reached out to you on several occasions asking for your consideration and sense of responsibility toward women and children. On various instances you have made strong speeches on your commitment to protecting women and children, yet they continue to be slaughtered in gruesome ways. Your voices are silent and your actions compound rather than mitigate the pain and suffering on the ground.⁹⁶

Yet, despite the progress peace activists have made in carving out space for themselves in the Anglophone debate, women's groups that are active in Cameroon have also come in for criticism for limiting their declarations to calls for peace. Nearly all women's groups avoid thorny issues such as reforms to the country's state structure, which most Anglophones perceive as the conflict's cause. One reason for their reticence is that they are understandably fearful of arrest or intimidation. At the same time, some female observers find their declarations too cautious, saying women's groups are afraid to publicly cross the boundaries of society's patriarchal standards.⁹⁷

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Crisis Group interviews, women leaders, August 2020-April 2021.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Some of the activists who have received threats are Felix Agbor Nkongho, Esther Omam, Frida Baiye, Simon Munzu, Sally Mboumien and Legenju Vitalise. Crisis Group interviews, civil society leaders, January 2022.

⁹⁶ SNWOT statement on Kumba school massacre, 24 October 2020. On 7 September 2021, a military tribunal in Buea sentenced four men blamed for these killings to death by firing squad. "Cameroon: Four get death sentence over Kumba school massacre", *Journal du Cameroun*, 8 September 2021.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, gender researcher, Douala, February 2021.

They argue that as a result, women's advocacy has limited impact that is waning still further.⁹⁸ For their part, some Cameroonian men question the need for women in "man-to-man" talks.⁹⁹

Against this backdrop, women activists in Cameroon find themselves squeezed by competing expectations and criticisms – with some saying they do too much and others that they do too little. The activism described above has done little to translate into the meaningful inclusion of women from different backgrounds into national-level efforts (which have been scant) to mitigate the effects of conflict or plan for a peaceful settlement and recovery. In the few instances when the government did include women, it allowed no one but its supporters to speak and tried to intimidate those with other opinions from expressing contrary views.¹⁰⁰

The lack of an inclusive approach was manifest in the 2019 national dialogue, which largely ignored gender concerns (although government-affiliated women headed two of the eight dialogue commissions) and as noted above included very few delegates with any connection to Anglophone grassroots movements. The dialogue resulted in 39 principal recommendations, none of which specifically addressed the differentiated concerns of women in a post-conflict future.¹⁰¹ "[The] government uses the advocacy of women to gain public and international sympathy but takes no concrete action", says one activist. "It does not consult them for policy or incorporate their needs".¹⁰² In March 2020, President Biya reserved one spot for an Anglophone woman on the nineteen-person committee following up on the recommendations, but his government continued to show minimal willingness to involve gender activists.¹⁰³

From 29 October to 1 November 2021, leaders of and stakeholders in roughly 30 southern Cameroon groups, comprising armed movements as well as civil society, humanitarian, political and faith-based organisations, met in Toronto, Canada, for a retreat.¹⁰⁴ For the first time, women participated in significant numbers. About a dozen women delegates issued a separate statement endorsing the retreat's declaration, pledged to support eventual dialogue, and appealed for funds and skills training to enable more women to take part in peace initiatives. The Toronto gathering was important in that, apart from the level of women's participation, it was the only event attended by such a wide array of groups with divergent views since the conflict began.

⁹⁸ Ibid. That conclusion, however, seems at best premature, especially given that many women deliberately strike a moderate tone to protect themselves and their families, and may feel they can speak more freely if and when separatists and the government move closer to peace talks.

⁹⁹ The expression "man to man" in Cameroon is used to denote serious matters among equals. Some men use it in an attempt to justify their position that women should not be involved in eventual peace negotiations. Crisis Group interviews, militia members, Bamenda, October 2020.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interviews, civil society leaders, researcher, Buea, Douala, August 2020–April 2021.

¹⁰¹ "Recommandations du grand dialogue national", National Dialogue website.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interview, senior SNWOT member, Yaoundé, September 2020.

¹⁰³ "Decree Creating Follow-up Committee for the Implementation of the Resolutions of the Grand National Dialogue", Presidency of the Republic of Cameroon, 23 March 2020.

¹⁰⁴ The retreat was organised by the Coalition for Dialogue, a self-funded group of Anglophone Cameroonians based in North America. Crisis Group interview, Judith Nwana, January 2022.

IV. The Conflict's Impact on Women

A. The Impact of Conflict-driven Displacement

The most significant impact of the conflict on women is displacement. Of the nearly 573,900 Cameroonians displaced by the Anglophone conflict, women and children make up 60 per cent, with many having been separated from family members and living at risk of abuse.¹⁰⁵ Cameroonian authorities have rejected several UN and NGO requests for the establishment of IDP camps where vulnerable people could be better cared for.¹⁰⁶ They worried that such camps would undermine the official narrative that life in the Anglophone regions is returning to normal.¹⁰⁷ As a result, women seek shelter with relatives or other hosts, who often do not house them for long. At each new location, they have to renegotiate the terms of their stay, as well as their personal safety, usually with men who control housing opportunities, modes of transport or access to informal forest camps, heightening the risk of financial and sexual exploitation.¹⁰⁸

Those who lack identity documents face additional pressures. Harassment at security checkpoints, already widespread before the conflict but even more common now, means that women sometimes have to negotiate passage by offering sex.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, displaced women without identity cards struggle to find new livelihoods elsewhere. They cannot get jobs, open a bank account, start a formal business or marry – and those who wish to leave the country have difficulty doing so.¹¹⁰ Children without birth certificates or school papers are often unable to enrol in new schools, and the few who are conditionally enrolled are barred from registering for exams. Some humanitarian organisations have rightly identified lack of documentation as a major problem and are working to get the government to issue new papers to those who have lost them.¹¹¹ Given the scale of disruption and Cameroon's institutional weaknesses, however, more concerted intervention is needed to help thousands of Anglophones trapped in the painstaking process of attempting to claim their civic rights.

¹⁰⁵ Many displaced people say they have not heard from their spouses or children since 2018. They often do not know whether their family members are dead or have sought refuge in the forest or elsewhere. The uncertainty is a source of enduring trauma. Crisis Group interviews, displaced Anglophones, Limbe, Yaoundé, Douala and Bamenda, August 2020–March 2021.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interviews, UN official and NGO staff, South West region, August–September 2020 and January 2021. “Cameroonian Anglophone: The ordeal of Cameroonian Anglophone ‘nomadic IDPs’”, Data Cameroon, 5 February 2020; Aminkeng and Alondi, “The Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon”, op. cit., p. 16.

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group interview, minister, Yaoundé, March 2021. The government has provided supplies, such as mattresses, but not in formal camps.

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interviews, women in separatist militia camps and IDPs, Anglophone regions, Littoral and Centre regions, August 2020–March 2021.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interviews, women survivors, various locations in North West, South West and Littoral regions, October 2020–February 2021.

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, displaced persons, South West, Littoral and North West regions, August 2020–March 2021.

¹¹¹ Security officials have harassed and stood in the way of NGO staff trying to recover documents, suggesting either misunderstanding of what is required to facilitate the process or wilful obstruction. Crisis Group interviews, IDPs, aid officials, South West region, August–September 2020 and February 2021.

The displacement crisis is also driving other forms of abuse. Children, especially young girls, are increasingly at risk of exploitation.¹¹² There is evidence that displaced children are forced into labour and exposed to sexual abuse, both in the Francophone regions and in neighbouring countries.¹¹³ In February 2021, for example, gendarmes arrested two suspected traffickers in Limbe as they travelled with 26 children from a conflict zone in the South West. The children were reportedly to work as servants in Francophone Cameroon.¹¹⁴ The conflict is hardly the sole driver of child trafficking in Cameroon; indeed, the phenomenon was widespread before 2017. But war has worsened the situation.¹¹⁵

B. *Conflict's Effects on Livelihoods*

Conflict has disrupted women's lives and livelihoods in many ways. Fearing attacks, most communities in the Anglophone regions have stopped organising social gatherings and development meetings, which previously helped resolve disputes and pool farming duties.¹¹⁶ Though they constitute the majority of the agricultural labour force, many women have lost access to farmlands.¹¹⁷ The closure of local markets and micro-finance institutions has further eroded their livelihoods.¹¹⁸ As a result, many say they are unable to pay their children's school fees.¹¹⁹ In addition, many influential women such as councillors and members of parliament have fled the Anglophone areas, weakening the position of those left behind. More generally, the widespread loss of livelihoods in the Anglophone regions has put up new barriers to girls' education. Parents who are struggling to make ends meet prefer to send their boys to school, leaving girls at home to help with chores or small trade.¹²⁰

Many Anglophone women have no one to rely on but themselves.¹²¹ Some have found new employment, for example by taking up domestic work in Francophone Cameroon. Others have started small businesses. "The crisis has pushed them out of their comfort zone to engage in activities that can support the couple and the home", says a woman leader. "Some women have become the sole breadwinners for their

¹¹² Crisis Group interviews, social services official, Limbe, September 2020; civil society leader and IDP host, Bamenda, October 2020.

¹¹³ Cameroon authorities reported dismantling a child-trafficking network that extends to Nigeria, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and Chad in the course of 2020. "Cameroonian rights groups helping children rescued from traffickers", VOA, 14 March 2021.

¹¹⁴ "Consequences of Anglophone crisis: Women detained for allegedly trafficking 26 children", *The Post*, 5 March 2021.

¹¹⁵ In 2021, the U.S. placed Cameroon on its Tier 2 Watch List, which measures compliance with international standards to fight human trafficking. "2020 Trafficking in Persons Report: Cameroon", U.S. Department of State, 16 June 2020.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, women, NGO leaders, separatist fighters, Anglophone regions, August 2020-March 2021.

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, civil society activist and IDP host, Bamenda, November 2020.

¹¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, women, NGO workers, Anglophone regions, August 2020-March 2021.

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, women IDPs in Francophone Centre and Littoral regions, January-March 2021.

¹²⁰ "Humanitarian Needs Overview – Cameroon", OCHA, March 2021.

¹²¹ Crisis Group interviews, displaced women, health worker, aid workers, North West, South West, Littoral and Centre regions, August 2020-April 2021.

families”.¹²² Aid is insufficient. Many conflict victims get no support at all. Those who do generally receive only periodic hygiene packs and irregular food or cash hand-outs, but they remain deprived of shelter. “Humanitarian assistance does not do much for affected communities”, says Violet Fokum, who heads a human rights NGO in the region.¹²³ “Women need skills and revenue for themselves and for their children”.

Sexual exploitation, abuse and trafficking of girls are all on the rise. As the crisis deepened in 2018, the city of Douala saw an influx of sex workers from the Anglophone regions. Many teenage girls are being abused in prostitution rings in Douala, Yaoundé and other Francophone towns.¹²⁴ Health workers report that sex work is often the only means of survival for women who are unable to feed their families. “Women suffer from sexual exploitation as several of them in host homes or IDP centres trade sex for favours and daily meals”, said a midwife in an Anglophone region.¹²⁵ With diminishing sexual health resources in the towns where IDPs have moved, cases of unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection are also mounting.¹²⁶

While on the whole women have been pinched between the growing needs to provide for themselves and their families and a growing scarcity of safe options for doing so, the result has been some expansion into roles traditionally performed by men. As men in the Anglophone regions exercise increased caution when going out in public, women now often outnumber men in skills training projects and at public events.¹²⁷ Women are also performing burial rites, a practice previously restricted to men.¹²⁸ In Belo in the North West, for instance, elderly women have begun digging graves and burying the dead.¹²⁹

C. Conflict and Gender-based Violence

Cameroon already had high levels of sexual violence before 2017.¹³⁰ The conflict has made women and girls in the Anglophone regions even more vulnerable to coercion. Ghost town operations, lockdowns and curfews have not only heightened the risk of domestic or sexual violence but also deprived women of access to medical care.¹³¹

¹²² Crisis Group interview, Catholic women leader, October 2020.

¹²³ Crisis Group interview, Buea, October 2020. Fokum is director of the Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa.

¹²⁴ “Cameroun : la prostitution, dernier recours des déplacées anglophones”, Camerounweb, 21 April 2021 ; “Récit d’une déplacée anglophone : ‘Parfois je couche avec dix hommes et la plupart refuse la protection’”, Le Bled Parle, 18 March 2020.

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interview, midwife in a hospital, Bamenda, November 2020.

¹²⁶ Crisis Group interviews, nurse, medical doctor, Bamenda, October 2020 and January 2021.

¹²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, aid workers, Yaoundé, February 2021; journalist, Bamenda, October 2020. Crisis Group observations of humanitarian outreach in Buea and Mbanga, January–April 2021.

¹²⁸ Crisis Group interview, researcher, Buea, August 2020.

¹²⁹ “They are digging graves to bury their relatives”, BBC, 20 July 2018.

¹³⁰ According to a 2011 study, 45 per cent of women had suffered some form of gender-based violence. Among married women or those living with a partner, 20 per cent reported having experienced sexual violence. “Cameroun : information sur la violence conjugale, y compris sur les lois ; protection offerte par l’État et services de soutien à la disposition des victimes (2014-2016)”, UNHCR/Refworld, 21 April 2016.

¹³¹ “Cameroun : ‘Les cas de viol se multiplient en zone anglophone’”, *Jeune Afrique*, 5 June 2019.

Those who have no choice but to venture outside in the face of restrictions risk abuse from security forces or militias at checkpoints.¹³² Some women, for instance, reported that they were forced to have sex with armed men at checkpoints during night-time curfews in the North West region in 2018 and 2019.¹³³ At least one separatist commander reportedly picked up women as spoils of war, subsequently forcing them to marry him.¹³⁴

The stigma attached to sexual abuse and the scarcity of humanitarian workers makes the prevalence of gender-based violence in the Anglophone regions hard to assess, however. The police are ill equipped to document reports of sexual abuse and official data, especially from rural areas, are either unreliable or non-existent. Most reports arrive from urban centres. The UN recorded 4,300 cases of sexual and gender-based violence in the Anglophone regions between February and December 2020. Almost half of these incidents involved rape or sexual assault, with 30 per cent of the victims being children.¹³⁵ Even with incomplete data from many districts and reluctance to report rape due to stigma, these figures are significant. In 2019, the UN recorded 1,065 cases of violence against women in the Anglophone regions, about a third of which were incidents of rape or sexual assault.¹³⁶

There is little doubt that rape is rampant. Fighters on both sides are reportedly using rape as a tool to punish and hurt communities. Allegations that soldiers and separatists have raped women during raids, sometimes in the presence of family members, are widespread.¹³⁷ Perhaps the gravest such incident to be reported occurred when soldiers stormed the village of Ebam, Manyu division, in the South West on 1 March 2020. According to human rights reports, they rounded up the members of 75 households and systematically raped over twenty women.¹³⁸ Although defence officials confirmed the raid, they denied that soldiers were guilty of rape.¹³⁹ Yet some survivors were found to be pregnant or to have contracted sexually transmitted diseases when humanitarian workers reached them two months later.¹⁴⁰

Gun-toting men are sometimes the only source of food and protection for women.¹⁴¹ But any dealings with conflict protagonists can prove dangerous. Fighters on both sides tend to view women as a source of information on the enemy or, worse, as spies.¹⁴² In areas contested by government forces and separatists, women have

¹³² "Anglophone crisis: Defence minister don promise for punish soldier weh e rape ngondere", BBC, 18 July 2018; "When protector becomes perpetrator: The rape in Bamenda that shocked the nation", *Le Gideon Magazine*, 7 August 2018.

¹³³ Crisis Group interviews, Ayah Foundation coordinator and South West/North West Women's Task Force members, August 2020-March 2021. See also "Women and children bear the brunt of Cameroon's conflict", *Equal Times*, 3 December 2018.

¹³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, conflict victims, Littoral region, January 2021.

¹³⁵ "Sexual violence pervasive in Cameroon's Anglophone regions", Al Jazeera, 21 April 2021.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Crisis Group interviews, displaced persons, judge, soldier, women leaders, Anglophone regions, August 2020-April 2021.

¹³⁸ "Cameroon: Survivors of Military Assault Await Justice", Human Rights Watch, 26 February 2021.

¹³⁹ "Cameroon: Army denies Ebam rights violations, accuses HRW of malicious goals", Mimi Mefo Info, 10 March 2021.

¹⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, humanitarian official, Buea, January 2021.

¹⁴¹ Crisis Group interviews, displaced women, Littoral region; NGO leader, Buea, January 2021.

¹⁴² Crisis Group interviews, soldier, separatist fighter, Bamenda, October-November 2020.

become entangled in relations with men from both camps, in some cases leading to their murders.¹⁴³ In August 2020, separatists killed three women in Bamenda and Muyuka after accusing them of espionage because they had allegedly had sexual relations with soldiers. In another incident in August 2021, separatists filmed themselves torturing a young woman for dating a soldier, beating her even after she said her boyfriend and his friends had raped her when she went to deliver them food.¹⁴⁴

Victims of gender-based violence find it difficult to get medical care. The conflict has affected all forms of transport, while medical facilities have been destroyed or attacked. Unidentified gunmen burnt sections of a hospital in Kumba (February 2019) and damaged medical facilities in Muyuka (March 2019), in Tole and in Buea (October 2019) as well as in Kikaikelaki (March 2021). Soldiers have burst into hospitals in search of separatists getting treatment, attacking medical staff and patients.¹⁴⁵ For their part, separatists have kidnapped medical staff and forced them to provide life-saving care. As a result, many doctors and nurses have fled to the main towns or left the conflict zones altogether.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ Crisis Group interviews, soldier, separatist fighter, Bamenda, October-November 2020; journalist, Yaoundé, August 2020. "Anglophone crisis: Who bi de dancing lady weh separatists 'kill' for Cameroon?", BBC, 6 August 2020; "Muyuka killing: 'De way deh kill wa sista na laik animal, na yi di increase wa pain' – Afiri Comfort family", BBC, 17 August 2020.

¹⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews, survivors' parents, various locations, September 2021.

¹⁴⁵ "Medical staff targeted in Cameroon's English-speaking regions", Deutsche Welle, 17 August 2018. At first, these attacks were indiscriminate, but now they are often intentional. Combatants are deliberately attacking or occupying hospitals, blocking ambulances from reaching people in need of care, and threatening, abducting and abusing medical personnel. "Five Things to Know about the Violence in North-West and South-West Cameroon", MSF, 23 May 2019.

¹⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, medical staff, Bamenda, January 2021.

V. The Way Forward

De-escalation and inclusive peace talks among the government, separatists and other Anglophone groups hold the key to a sustainable political resolution of the Anglophone conflict.¹⁴⁷ Sharing this view, donors appear reluctant to fund relief efforts when there is no tangible progress toward peacebuilding, worrying that their contributions will have little impact. Though the government seeks to frame its economic recovery program as a rebuilding effort – and thus part of its narrative that the conflict is winding down – many donors consider such framing premature. Diplomats and aid workers in Cameroon say their capitals hesitate to make funds available as long as the violence continues.¹⁴⁸

But even if immediate prospects for negotiations between the government and separatists are dim, there are meaningful steps that donors, Yaoundé and other actors can take to help address the differentiated harms that women are experiencing in the conflict. They can offer relief to displaced women; work to rein in and mitigate the impact of gender-based violence; encourage women's leadership of and participation in peaceful activism; and prepare for women to be well represented in the peace process when the time arrives.

A. *Alleviating the Hardship of Displacement*

Urgent action is required to alleviate the plight of women in the Anglophone conflict zones, particularly those who have fled their homes. As a first step, it is essential that security forces and separatists grant humanitarian workers full access to the two regions and allow them to perform their duties unhindered. Beyond that, the government and donors should take several steps, as outlined below.

The government should reissue civil papers, whether birth certificates, identity cards or school certificates, to displaced persons who lack important documentation. Obtaining these papers is complicated, time-consuming and particularly burdensome for women-headed families. As part of the government's recovery plan, the UNDP set a target of helping the government reissue 30,000 documents by 2021. This is a good start, but insufficient to meet the needs of all those who have been displaced and lost important papers. Given the scale of the problem, the government and international partners should establish a one-stop shop for civil papers in towns that host large numbers of displaced persons. This step would not only allow displaced persons to resume something closer to normal life, and spare them harassment at checkpoints, but it could also help soften the resentment many Anglophones feel toward Yaoundé. These one-stop shops should also ensure that residents of the Anglophone regions can register births and marriages.

The government and donors should also work together to assess the educational needs of displaced families, especially those led by women, and develop an adequate response. Such a response will almost certainly entail expanding educational coverage by refurbishing schools and vocational education centres that are located outside

¹⁴⁷ Crisis Group Report, *Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis: How to Get to Talks?*, op. cit.

¹⁴⁸ Crisis Group interviews, donor officials and diplomats, Yaoundé, December 2020, February 2021 and May 2021.

immediate conflict zones, recruiting teachers and facilitating access for displaced children, including those who have no civil papers. For their part, separatists should wind down their attacks on schools and teachers for good, as well as suspend school boycotts indefinitely.

Furthermore, the government and donors need to consider the economic impact of the conflict on women. The conflict has disrupted grassroots structures such as credit networks, cutting off access to cash. Donors and government could either fill the gap by providing direct financial aid to displaced women-led families or offer support to help reopen these structures. Further, the government should ensure gender equity in allotment of the 1,000 hectares of farmland it has earmarked for displaced people, accompanying land distribution with farming or business skills training.

B. *Mitigating the Impact of Gender-based Violence*

Given the alarming rate of sexual violence in the Anglophone regions, the government and donors should work to enhance medical care for rape survivors, including testing and counselling. For example, they could create women-led treatment centres in hospitals in the Anglophone regional capitals Bamenda and Buea and in other large towns, such as Kumba, Limbe, Kumbo and Mamfe. These gender-based violence units could also act as temporary shelters for women and girls who need emergency housing.

Cameroon's donors, with government backing, could also help improve data gathering on incidents of sexual violence in order to better understand the scale of the problem, raise awareness and collect information for eventual legal procedures in the service of accountability and transparency. They could, for example, support several non-governmental organisations active in the two regions that have gender-based violence experts already collecting such data but suffer access difficulties.

Further down the line, the government should build capacity among medical staff to give rape victims specialised treatment and attention, including trauma counselling. It should also step up efforts to train the military and police in their international humanitarian law obligations and recruit more women into the security forces. Lastly, it should make greater efforts to bring perpetrators of sexual violence to justice.

For example, the government and its external partners should provide resources for field investigations and gender-sensitive trainings for legal counsellors, prosecutors and judges. Given the number of abuses committed by the national security forces, President Biya should order an investigation into the alleged mass rape of 1 March 2021 at Ebam, South West, due to the scale of the attack, just as he did after allegations of a massacre at Ngarbuh, North West, on 14 February 2020. He should also ensure that police properly investigate other cases of widespread violence and hold the perpetrators to account. On their side, due to the absence of law enforcement mechanisms in their areas, separatist commanders should coordinate and exclude from their ranks militiamen alleged to be responsible for violence or other abuses directed at women.

C. Protecting Democratic Space for Peace Activists

As women activists have become more vocal, they have come under increasing pressure, including hostile rhetoric, arrests and threats of violence, from government officials, security forces and separatists. To reduce the risk of harm, both the government and separatists should allow activists in the country to campaign for a peaceful resolution of the conflict without fear of reprisal.

Secondly, despite their wide-ranging activism, women-led civil society groups have been largely excluded from convenings to discuss a political resolution to the conflict. The expertise and networks of women leaders should be better leveraged in efforts to reduce suffering caused by the conflict and plan for long-term recovery.

Donors could help by supporting a broader range of women-led civil society organisations, shifting their focus from urban activists to rural grassroots groups with women leaders who are key influencers in their villages, as well as cultural and development-oriented associations.¹⁴⁹ Such support could help smaller, local women's organisations hone peacebuilding skills. These groups could then use this knowledge to raise awareness about the conflict's impact on women, for example, and to employ a gender-sensitive approach while undertaking mediation initiatives with militiamen. Specific training could also help them make their organisations more inclusive and build tailored communication and advocacy campaigns.

D. Preparing for Women's Participation in an Eventual Peace Process

In previous publications, Crisis Group has advocated for talks among the government, separatists and Anglophone leaders to secure a ceasefire and work out a compromise that could end the conflict.¹⁵⁰ The vast majority of prominent Anglophone leaders – especially those who would be able to impose a ceasefire and persuade insurgents to adhere to an eventual peace deal – are men, as are those in government who are in a position to advocate for eventual negotiations. Cultural preconceptions and personal ambitions may lead negotiators on both sides to relegate both female representatives and gender concerns to side discussions.

Yet sidelining women from the peace process would be inequitable and unwise. As noted above, at least some Anglophone women are actively involved in the conflict. Elderly women in particular are influential in rural areas, and their buy-in is important to building sustainable peace. Women, whether they are community organisers or high-profile peace activists, could also be important advocates for an eventual political settlement.

Political polarisation will inevitably complicate things if talks occur. Women's organisations have an array of different views, and even groups focused on seemingly neutral gender issues are likely to be divided along political lines. It will not be pos-

¹⁴⁹ Some donors are supporting capacity development for women peacebuilders. The Canadian, German, British, Swiss and U.S. missions in Cameroon have sponsored training for women leaders, mostly women from urban areas. Several women in conflict zones were unable to join these training sessions, or the July 2021 Cameroon Women's Peace Convention in Yaoundé, because they had lost their identification cards in the conflict. Crisis Group interviews, diplomats and women leaders, Yaoundé, July 2021.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

sible to get all women's groups to support a single political settlement, but inclusive talks should consider and reflect women leaders' varied political affiliations and backgrounds. Representatives of influential women's organisations, whether they campaign for peace or advocate for a different state structure, should therefore have a seat at the table. These organisations could thus also ensure that women with expertise on issues such as gender-based violence can participate in more technical discussions that feed into an eventual settlement.

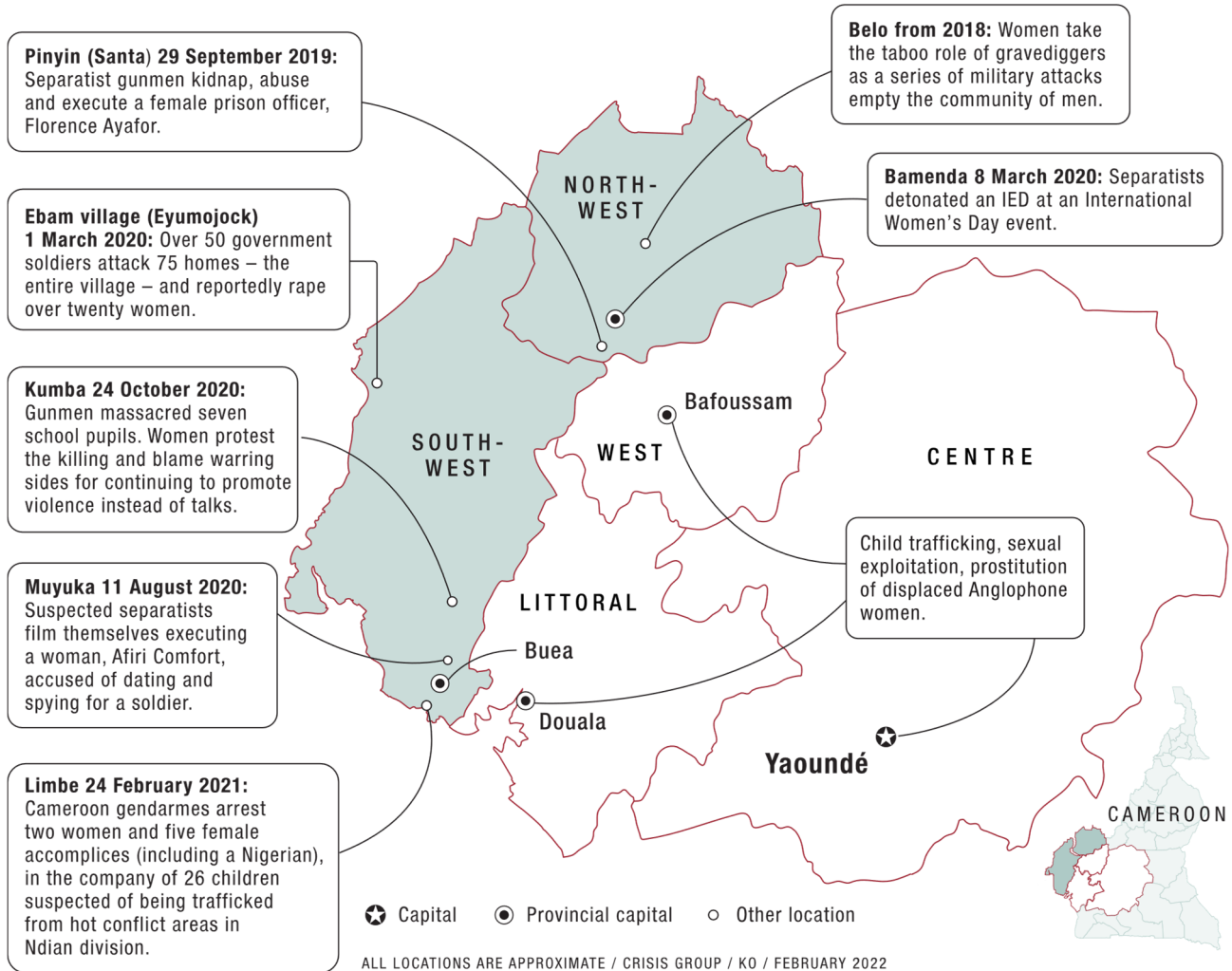
Conflict protagonists and international actors can start working now to ensure that women can meaningfully contribute when the time comes for talks. Some donors have already taken steps in the right direction. In 2020 and 2021, Canada, the UK, Switzerland, Germany and the U.S. provided training programs for women in peacebuilding, preparing them for these roles. In this vein, increased donor support for a broader range of women-led civil society organisations would not only encourage their relief work and advocacy, as discussed above, but also better position them to participate in peace talks down the line and communicate a range of women's perspectives. When discussions about structuring the peace process draw near, mediators should press for quotas to include representatives of women's organisations, building on the existing gender quota in Cameroon's parliament, while impressing on the two sides that gender issues should be incorporated into all aspects of dialogue, whether it is ensuring compliance with a ceasefire, evaluating reconstruction proposals or tackling justice dilemmas.

VI. Conclusion

Cameroon's government and the Anglophone separatists who oppose it have overlooked the role of women in the conflict between them. Yet women have been politically active from the start, whether through protests, community activism, peace advocacy or participation in combat. Moreover, the conflict has disproportionately affected women and girls, who constitute the majority of the displaced. Gender-based violence and sexual exploitation are on the rise. It is time that the two warring parties widen their focus and alleviate the differentiated harms affecting women, many of whom have lost access to education, lost their livelihoods or suffered sexual violence. Though women peace campaigners have come into their own after five years of conflict, women's groups remain largely excluded from the political debate. Future talks about a political settlement will have to include women's groups, and preparations for their involvement, reflecting their roles as both civil society actors and conflict protagonists, should start now.

Yaoundé/Nairobi/Brussels, 23 February 2022

Appendix A: Violence Against Women and Children: Selected Events Map



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 80 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.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. Ero first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director and Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, UN Mission in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. The ideas, opinions and comments expressed by Crisis Group are entirely its own and do not represent or reflect the views of any donor. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Canadian Department of National Defence, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, Global Affairs Canada, Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, Japan International Cooperation Agency, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Principality of Liechtenstein, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, United Arab Emirates (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy), United Nations Development Programme, United Nations World Food Programme, UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and the World Bank.

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February 2022

Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on Africa since 2019

Special Reports and Briefings

Council of Despair? The Fragmentation of UN Diplomacy, Special Briefing N°1, 30 April 2019.

Seven Opportunities for the UN in 2019-2020, Special Briefing N°2, 12 September 2019.

Seven Priorities for the New EU High Representative, Special Briefing N°3, 12 December 2019.

COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch, Special Briefing N°4, 24 March 2020 (also available in French and Spanish).

A Course Correction for the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, Special Briefing N°5, 9 December 2020.

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A Tale of Two Councils: Strengthening AU-UN Cooperation, Africa Report N°279, 25 June 2019.

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Réduire les tensions électorales en République centrafricaine, Africa Report N°296, 10 December 2020 (only available in French).

New Challenges for Chad's Army, Africa Report N°298, 22 janvier 2021 (only available in French).

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Managing Ethiopia's Unsettled Transition, Africa Report N°269, 21 February 2019.

Salvaging South Sudan's Fragile Peace Deal, Africa Report N°270, 13 March 2019.

Bridging the Gap in the Nile Waters Dispute, Africa Report N°271, 20 March 2019.

Averting Violence in Zanzibar's Knife-edge Election, Africa Briefing N°144, 11 June 2019.

Women and Al-Shabaab's Insurgency, Africa Briefing N°145, 27 June 2019.

Time for Ethiopia to Bargain with Sidama over Statehood, Africa Briefing N°146, 4 July 2019.

Somalia-Somaliland: The Perils of Delaying New Talks, Africa Report N°280, 12 July 2019.

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