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Cameroon: New Abuses by Both Sides

(Nairobi) – New abuses in Cameroon's Anglophone regions by both government security forces and armed separatists highlight the urgent need to protect communities at risk and to hold those responsible for abuses to account, Human Rights Watch said today.

Cameroonian security forces killed two civilians, raped a 53-year-old woman, destroyed and looted at least 33 homes, shops, as well as a traditional leader's palace in the North-West region on June 8 and 9, 2021. Armed separatist fighters in the South-West region killed a 12-year-old boy on June 6, and a 51-year-old teacher on July 1. Further, on June 25, separatist fighters in the North-West region kidnapped four humanitarian workers and held them overnight.

"Cameroon's security forces have an obligation to lawfully counter attacks by armed separatist groups, and protect people's rights during periods of violence," said Ilaria Allegrozzi, senior researcher at Human Rights Watch. "But yet again, we learn that they have responded to the threat from separatist groups with attacks on civilians and serious human rights violations of their own."

Since the Anglophone crisis began in late 2016, government forces have regularly committed serious human rights violations during security operations against the armed separatists fighting to create an independent Anglophone state of "Ambazonia." The recent uptick in violations came amid renewed clashes, with the army spokesperson reporting that security forces were involved "in at least 30 heavy gun battles with separatists in June."

Between June 12 and 23 Human Rights Watch conducted telephone interviews with 10 victims and witnesses to human rights violations by security forces, as well as with 18 relatives of victims, journalists, and civil society activists. Human Rights Watch also interviewed a family member of the teacher killed by separatist fighters. Human Rights Watch corroborated victim and witness accounts with photographs the victims provided.

Victims and witnesses said that in the very early hours of June 9, about 150 security force members from both the regular army and elite Rapid Intervention Battalion (*Bataillon d'Intervention Rapide* - BIR) conducted a security operation in and around Mbuluf village, North-West region. As the forces approached the village on foot, fearful residents fled to the nearby bush.

Human Rights Watch spoke to two Mbuluf residents who said that security forces stopped their group of six – a husband and wife, their two children, another man, and another woman – in the vicinity of the village.

The wife said that the soldiers stopped the group as they were fleeing at around 1 or 2 a.m. The soldiers asked the couple where the separatist fighters were. "We said we didn't know," she said. "They said my husband had a gun. We said we had no gun. They said they would kill us, and then one of them raped me."

Other soldiers threatened and beat both men, the wife, and another member of the group. The soldiers then forced all six people to walk for about two hours to Ndzeen village.

When the soldiers arrived in Ndzeen, they broke into, damaged, and looted at least 33 shops and homes, including the residence of the *fon* (a local traditional authority).

Cameroonian soldiers during an operation in Ndzeen village, North-West region, on June 9, 2021 pushed over a sculpture of the oldest 'Fon' at the residence of the current 'Fon', the village's traditional authority. Residents of Ndzeen told Human Rights Watch that deliberately knocking over the sculpture is a sign of disrespect and desecration. June 9, 2021, residence of the 'Fon', Ndzeen, North-West region, Cameroon© Private

A man holds what is left of the ancestral royal throne of the 'Fon', the traditional authority of Ndzeen village. The throne was deliberately destroyed by Cameroonian soldiers during a security operation in Ndzeen on June 9, 2021. Residence of the 'Fon', Ndzeen, North-West region, Cameroon, June 9, 2021© Private

"They desecrated my palace, damaging traditional artifacts, including the ancient royal throne and an ancestral chair, and entered into the sacred and secret areas of the palace, where none have access to," the *fon* said. "They ransacked and scattered the royal regalia. It is a shame." BIR soldiers previously [attacked and looted a world heritage site](#), the Royal Palace in Bafut, North-West region, in September 2019.

A door of one of the homes damaged and looted by Cameroonian soldiers during a security operation in Ndzeen village, North-West region, on June 9, 2021. Ndzeen, North-West region, Cameroon, June 9, 2021© Private

The security forces then continued to Mbah village on foot, about another two hours away, taking the group of six people with them. In Mbah they released everyone except the 58-year-old husband of the rape survivor. His body was found on June 11, shot in the mouth, through the head, in Tatum village, about 30 kilometers from Mbah.

On June 8, at about 7 p.m., in Gom village, North-West region, two soldiers in civilian clothes, whom a witness recognized as regular army soldiers from the Gom military base, broke into the *fon*'s home, harassed the eight people there, including a 72-year-old man whom they beat. At about 7:30 p.m., they questioned and then shot Nwang Lydia, a 60-year-old woman, in the right leg after she failed to provide information about a separatist fighter.

Her neighbor, the 72-year-old man who had been beaten, said that the assailants forced him and his wife to carry Lydia in the direction of the Gom military base for questioning. They carried Lydia as far as a bridge about two kilometers from her house, when the soldiers told them to leave her there. The soldiers then killed Lydia with a gunshot to the chest. Lydia's relatives recovered her body from the bridge the following morning.

On July 15 Human Rights Watch emailed its findings to the army spokesperson, Commander Atonack Guemo, requesting responses to specific questions. Guemo did not reply.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) [reported](#) that on June 6, members of an armed group attacked a religious center in Mamfe, South-West region, "killing a 12-year-old boy and wounding a 16-year-old boy." On July 1, [local media](#) reported that suspected separatist fighters killed Fuh Max Dang, a physics teacher at Government Bilingual High School in Kumba, South-West region. Human Rights Watch spoke to a relative of the deceased, who said that separatist fighters had previously threatened the teacher, warning him that he would face consequences if he did not stop teaching.

Human Rights Watch has previously documented widespread separatist [attacks on education](#), including against [teachers](#), [students](#), and schools. Separatists have ordered government schools in the region to close.

[International media](#) also reported that at least 6 civilians were killed in Kumbo, North-West region, on June 12, "when an explosive device planted by [separatist] fighters detonated."

"The crisis in the Anglophone regions has had a devastating impact on civilians, but those responsible for serious abuses have yet to face any consequences," [Allegrozzi](#) said. "Cameroon's authorities should investigate and prosecute the attackers and their commanders, while the UN Security Council and other regional and international partners should impose targeted sanction against those responsible for the grave human rights violations."

For more details on recent abuses and accounts from victims and witnesses, please see below.

Recent Human Rights Violations by Security Forces

Abusive Security Operations in Mbuluf and Ndzeen Villages (June 9)

Rape, Ill Treatment, and Unlawful Killing

Of the six people taken in Mbuluf, Human Rights Watch spoke to the 53-year-old rape survivor, "Sant," and the man who was released at Mbah village, 60-year-old "Kan". Human Rights Watch also interviewed the murdered man's brother and another Mbuluf resident who fled to the bush at the start of the attack and later attended his brother's burial.

The rape survivor said that she did not go to a hospital for post-rape treatment because she lacked financial means, and she did not report the rape to the authorities. "I did not go to report the rape because I am afraid, and it could be used against me," she said.

The man described his treatment by the soldiers on June 9:

They said, "Remove your clothes! If you don't remove your clothes, we'll rape your wife in front of you!" They asked me, "Where are the amba boys [separatist fighters]?" I answered, "I don't know." They kicked me five times and pushed me on the ground. Then they forced us to walk to Ndzeen ... They were telling us to move quickly, to run. It was tough, especially for the children. The mother carried the youngest on her shoulders ... At a certain point, the soldiers attempted talking to the older child, the girl. When they told her, "Don't be afraid," the girl started crying. She had seen the soldiers and their weapons, and she was frightened.

Both witnesses said that after the soldiers were finished in Ndzeen, they forced the captives to keep walking for about two hours until they reached Mbah village. "The soldiers let us go except for my husband," the woman said. "This was the last time I saw my husband. For three days I didn't have news. I was then alerted that his body had been found on the road far away."

The brother of the victim retrieved and returned the body to Mbuluf, where he was buried on June 12:

Someone from the Shisong hospital in Kumbo called me on June 10. He said the body of my brother had been found in Tatum with his identity card on the chest. I went there and found his body was by the roadside, face up, looking at the sky. There was a bullet wound in his mouth ... The bullet had passed through his head. The big hole was in the back.

Destruction and Looting of Homes, Shops

On June 9, after they arrived in Ndzeen, security forces stole from individual villagers and ransacked homes and shops. Human Rights Watch interviewed 5 victims of their looting spree and reviewed 40 photographs they provided showing property damage to corroborate witness accounts.

A 58-year-old farmer and his family fled to the bush when they saw soldiers coming at about 7 a.m.; they returned at about midday. "I came back when things had calmed down and the soldiers had left," he said. "I found that my home had been damaged and my money stolen. Two doors were destroyed, 17,700 XAF (US \$31.86) was missing, and water had been poured on my bed."

A 51-year-old woman said:

As soon as we heard gunshots, we knew the soldiers were coming. We saw them approaching and ran away. We know they can be destructive. We fled to the bush, and when we came back, we found out that they had broken into many homes and the Catholic mission too. In my home, the door was broken, and the mattresses were removed from the beds and thrown outside, along with my dresses.

A 40-year-old farmer was in front of his house when he saw soldiers approaching:

I saw about 15 soldiers, both from the regular army and the Rapid Intervention Battalion. They were part of a bigger group of about 150. They shot twice in the air. At this point, those who had not fled yet ran away. I stayed because I had no fear. They approached me and asked me where the amba boys were and to show them the home of an amba general. I told them I used to see the amba, but I didn't know about that general and his home.

At gunpoint, the soldiers searched the farmer's pockets and took 3,000 XAF (US\$5.40) and his identity card, phone, and memory card. Then they made him take them to the market, where they stole food, drinks, and anything else they could find.

Unlawful Killing of a 60-year-old Woman from Gom Village (June 8)

Human Rights Watch spoke to a witness to Nwang Lydia's killing, a relative of the victim, and three people who saw the body and attended the burial. The witness said:

Soldiers in plain clothes – I know them, they had guns, they have a base in Gom – asked her, “Did you see that amba running away?” She said she did not see anyone as she was making food for her husband. So, one of the soldiers shot her at close range. She was shot in the right leg. Soldiers wanted us to carry Lydia to their base. It was for questioning. The woman was in a lot of pain, and she was crying. Before we arrived at the camp, they said we should drop her at the bridge. And as we walked away, they shot her dead.

A pastor in Gom helped collect her body the next day and corroborated the location of the gunshot wounds in her right leg and chest.

Human Rights Abuses by Separatist Fighters

On July 1, at about 7:30 p.m., two suspected separatist fighters broke into the home of Fuh Max Dang, a 51-year-old physics teacher at the Government Bilingual High School in Kumba, southwest region and shot him dead in front of his two children, said a relative of Dang who was just outside the house when he was shot:

He had eaten his dinner and was in the living room with his two children. I was outside when I heard a gunshot. I rushed inside just to find him bleeding on the floor. He had been shot right in the heart. The killers had run away, leaving the door wide open. He died shortly after. He had been previously threatened by the amba boys [separatist fighters] because of his job as a teacher. The amba boys didn't want him to teach, and he was forced to flee Kumba and move to Yaoundé for safety. He had just moved back to Kumba one year ago.

In 2019 Dang's wife was attacked at their home in Kumba by separatist fighters looking for her husband. The separatist fighters attempted to kidnap her, but they let her go following a payment of 60,000 CFA [\$ 1,080].

Restriction of Humanitarian Access and Abuses Against Aid Workers

The violence by both security forces and armed separatists in the North-West and South-West regions has caused a major humanitarian crisis. Cameroon has [712,000 internally displaced people](#) in the Anglophone regions, neighboring Littoral and West regions, and the nearby Centre region. At least [2.2 million people](#) need humanitarian assistance, according to the United Nations.

Yet humanitarian access is severely restricted and humanitarian workers have been victims of attacks by both [government forces](#) and [armed separatist groups](#).

In December 2020 the authorities [suspended](#) all activities of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF, Doctors Without Borders) in the North-West region, accusing the organization of [being too close to Anglophone separatists](#). MSF believes this suspension has deprived tens of thousands of people of access to vital health care.

[In an apparent attempt to curb reports](#) of security forces' human rights violations and prevent international monitoring of the Anglophone crisis, the government has denied journalists and international human rights groups, including Human Rights Watch, access to the Anglophone regions.

Separatist fighters have also [hindered aid agencies' access](#) in the areas under their control. A local aid group told Human Rights Watch that on June 25, Ambazonia Defense Forces (ADF) separatist fighters stopped their vehicle in Guzang, North-West region, kidnapped the four staff members inside, and beat one, then released them the following day. An ADF spokesperson said that the organization had not been given approval to pass on the road, so they were treated as suspicious until their identity was verified. He denied that they were kidnapped.

ecoi.net summary:

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by both government security
forces and armed separatists
in Anglophone regions



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