

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	270
Land:	Cameroun
Kilde:	Human Rights Watch
Titel:	Army Killings, Disappearances, in North-West Region; Investigate and prosecute abusive security forces
Udgivet:	11. august 2022
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	28. oktober 2022

Cameroon: Army Killings, Disappearances, in North-West Region; Investigate and Prosecute Abusive Security Forces

Investigate and Prosecute Abusive Security Forces

(Nairobi) – [Cameroonian](#) soldiers summarily killed at least 10 people and carried out a series of other abuses between April 24 and June 12, during counter-insurgency operations in the North-West region, Human Rights Watch said today. The troops also burned 12 homes, destroyed, and looted health facilities, arbitrarily detained at least 26 people, and are presumed to have forcibly disappeared up to 17 others.

“Instead of protecting the population from threats posed by armed groups, the Cameroonian security forces have committed serious violations against civilians, causing many to flee their homes,” said [Ilaria Allegrozzi](#), senior central Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. “Cameroonian authorities should conduct credible and impartial investigations into these serious abuses and hold the abusers accountable.”

Between June 3 and July 21, Human Rights Watch interviewed by telephone 35 people with knowledge of 4 incidents in which the security forces allegedly committed serious abuses. Interviewees included 16 witnesses, 8 family members of victims, a community leader, 3 journalists, 5 members of civil society organizations, and 2 human rights lawyers. The incidents took place in and around the towns and villages of Belo, Chomba, Missong, and Ndop. Human Rights Watch also reviewed 53 photographs and 16 videos, shared directly with researchers, showing evidence of the military violations.

The violations were committed during military operations against armed separatist groups seeking independence for the two English-speaking regions of Cameroon, North-West and South-West. Human Rights Watch has also [documented](#) serious abuses by separatist fighters during the same period, including the killings and kidnapping of civilians, and attacks on students, teachers, and schools.

Witnesses said that on April 24, soldiers from the Rapid Intervention Battalion (Bataillon d'intervention rapide, BIR) outside of Ndop, stopped, severely beat, and then detained between 30 and 40 motorbike riders who were part of a funeral convoy, allegedly because the soldiers suspected them of being separatist fighters. Up to 17 of those detained are presumed forcibly disappeared, as their whereabouts is unknown, but they were last seen in military custody.

“The soldiers selected those among us who had dreadlocks,” a bike rider who was later released told Human Rights Watch. “For them this is an indication that you are an amba boy [separatist fighter]. They forced us to undress and beat us savagely with an iron hammer and with their belts.”

On June 1, soldiers from the 53rd Motorized Infantry Battalion (Bataillon d'infanterie motorisée, BIM) [killed](#) nine people, including four women and an 18-month-old girl, in Missong village, in a reprisal operation against a community suspected of harboring separatist fighters.

On June 8, soldiers conducted an abusive military operation in Chomba, burning a home and looting the local health center. They also arrested a woman along with her 11-year-old foster child and held them for 24 days at the BIR barracks in Bafut, North-West region. Human Rights Watch [has documented](#) other cases of civilians detained on military bases, in violation of Cameroonian law.

From June 9 to 11, in Belo, security forces summarily killed one man, injured another, burned at least 12 homes, destroyed a community health center, and looted at least 10 shops.

[Human Rights Watch](#), [Amnesty International](#), and other organizations have also documented a longstanding pattern of unlawful and incommunicado detention and torture in custody in Cameroon.

On July 28, Human Rights Watch sent an email to the Cameroon army spokesperson, Colonel Cyrille Serge Atonfack Guemo, detailing the alleged abuses and requesting answers to specific questions. Atonfack did not reply.

Since 2016, Cameroon's English-speaking regions [have been in the throes](#) of a political and security crisis between armed separatist groups seeking independence for their self-proclaimed state of Ambazonia, comprising the North-West and South-West regions, and the Cameroonian security forces. The violence [has caused about 6,000 deaths](#) and a major humanitarian crisis, with almost [600,000 people](#) internally displaced within the Anglophone and neighboring regions, and over [77,000](#) forced to become refugees in Nigeria.

[Both](#) Cameroonian security forces and armed separatist groups [have committed serious human rights abuses](#) but have faced limited or no consequences. Impunity remains a key driver of the crisis, emboldening abusers, and fueling further harm and violence.

On July 19, speaking from Bamenda, the capital of the North-West region, while appointing new generals to command troops fighting separatists, Joseph Beti Assomo, Cameroon's defense minister, [said](#) that the military should take all necessary precautions to prevent human rights violations during operations and hold those responsible for abuses accountable.

In a June 7 [news release](#), Atonfack, the army spokesman, acknowledged military responsibility for the killings in Missong village and announced that an investigation had been opened. Promising to investigate violations is a positive step, but the Cameroonian government has failed to make good on previous such commitments, Human Rights Watch said.

More than two years after the massacre of 21 civilians, including 13 children, [in Ngarbuh](#), North-West region, by Cameroonian soldiers, and the government's acknowledgement of military responsibility, the trial of those accused of involvement in the killings has [dragged on](#). This slow pace raises concerns about the justice system's efficiency and ability to deliver justice to the victims and fight impunity.

The crisis in the Anglophone regions has received little media and international attention and has been considered [one of the most neglected](#) worldwide. In her June 8 [briefing](#) to the United Nations Security Council on the situation in the central African region, Assistant Secretary-General for Africa Martha Pobeé urged "the international community to step up support to national efforts toward a peaceful resolution" of the Anglophone crisis. On July 25 and 26, French President Emmanuel Macron [visited](#) Cameroon, and met with his counterpart Paul Biya. Macron [did not publicly address crucial human rights issues](#), including human rights abuses committed by both security forces and separatist groups in the Anglophone regions.

"Cameroon's international partners, including the African Union and United Nations, should insist that there can be no peace in the Anglophone regions without justice," [Allegruzzi](#) said. "Cameroon's bilateral partners should send a strong and clear message to the Cameroonian government that engaging in atrocities with impunity has consequences."

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

Arbitrary Detention and Other Abuses

On April 24, BIR soldiers detained and severely beat between 30 and 40 motorbike riders who were part of a funeral convoy heading to Oku from Ndop, suspecting the motorcycle riders of being separatist fighters. The soldiers took them to their base in Ndop and divided them into two groups. Twenty-three were transferred to the BIR base in Bafut, about 44 kilometers from Ndop, where they were held for approximately three weeks incommunicado.

Then, they were moved to two gendarmerie stations in Bamenda, where they were held for another five days. On May 21, all 23 were transferred to Bamenda's central prison, where they remain. They have been taken before the Bamenda's military court at least twice since May but are yet to be formally charged, and their trial has not started.

The situation or whereabouts of the approximately 7 to 17 men other detained on April 24 in Ndop has not been revealed and they are presumed forcibly disappeared, as they were last seen in military custody in April.

Human Rights Watch spoke to two motorbike riders who were at the Ndop BIR base on April 24, to five relatives of three motorbike riders currently held at Bamenda's central prison, and to a relative of one of those missing.

A 22-year-old bike rider who had been at the base said:

The BIR stopped us in the middle of the road. They selected those whom they suspected to be amba fighters [separatist fighters]. Some were chosen because they had dreadlocks, others because the BIR said they had their pictures on file and they knew they were amba boys [separatist fighters]. The soldiers started beating them with a hammer, kicking them with their boots. After more than four hours like this, the BIR took them to their base, in Ndop. As a president of the motorbike riders' union, I followed them there. I wanted to speak with the BIR commander to negotiate their release. I wanted to tell him that these people were not amba fighters, but ordinary men. Instead, the soldiers beat me and kicked me.

A female student whose 20-year-old brother is among those in Bamenda central prison said:

As soon as I was informed that my brother had been arrested, I started looking for him. I went to all police and gendarmerie stations in Bamenda, but I couldn't find him. I was very worried. For about 10 days, I had no news about him. I thought he had been killed. Then, someone told me that he was detained at Bafut BIR camp. So, I went there, but the soldiers refused me access. They did not confirm he was held there but said that I should wait in Bamenda because "they will be taken there".

The uncle of a 22-year-old man who is among the disappeared said:

My nephew is missing. We don't know where he is now. The last time he was seen was at BIR base in Ndop. That's what other motorbike riders told me. I went to the Bafut BIR base, but the soldiers told me he wasn't there. Rumors circulated that he was held at the gendarmerie station in Kumbo. So, I went there, but I didn't find him. I searched for him in Bamenda, at multiple police, and gendarmerie stations, no avail. I am very worried. I hope we find him alive.

Abusive Military Operation in Belo

Five witnesses described a three-day army operation in and around the town of Belo from June 9 to 11, during which the security forces summarily killed 47-year-old Ndifoin Clement, known as Bo Luh, injured a 33-year-old man, burned at least 12 homes, destroyed a community health center, and looted at least 10 shops.

The Killing of Bo Luh

A 29-year-old woman who lives in Belo's Njinkfuin neighborhood described what happened when soldiers killed Bo Luh and burned his home on June 10:

The soldiers came in the morning, shooting. I saw them going toward Bo Luh's home. I hid in the house and watched. I saw smoke and flames coming out from that house. They [the soldiers] burned it. When they [the soldiers] left, I went there and found Bo Luh's body on the ground. He had been shot in the back. I ran away and waited until about 4 p.m. Meantime, Bo Lu's body had been taken to his family's home. I went there and helped relatives washing and dressing the body. I saw a bullet wound on the right side of the back.

Human Rights Watch also reviewed five pictures showing Bo Luh's body and a 28-second video showing Bo Luh's home after the burning. Witnesses and Belo residents told Human Rights Watch that soldiers targeted Bo Luh because they suspected him of having ties with separatist fighters.

Soldiers also shot a 33-year-old man in the right leg in Belo, injuring him. The victim, who asked to remain anonymous, said:

At about 3 a.m., I was coming back home from a wake, when I was caught by the soldiers. I was riding my motorbike. They shot at me at close range. I fell off the motorbike, but I managed to run away. I heard a soldier saying in French: "*Je l'ai raté*" [I missed him]. I went to the Mbingo Baptist hospital where I underwent surgery to extract the bullet. I was discharged seven days later.

Looting and Burning of Property

A humanitarian worker living at Belo's Njinkfuin neighborhood said that he saw soldiers ransacking several stores on June 10: "They broke into shops and looted what they found, electronics, drinks, food. I saw them loading these items on their trucks. Up to 10 stores were looted."

Another Njinkfuin resident said that soldiers burned homes on June 10 and 11 in his neighborhood, as well as in nearby areas, including Aboh, Ashing, Bobong, and Sho. He said:

The BIR and regular army soldiers entered Belo with up to 13 armored vehicles. They came to the area where I live shooting indiscriminately. On June 10, they burned four houses: one at Njinkfuin and three at Aboh. On June 11, they burned two houses in Ashing, three in Sho, and three more in Bobong. I filmed some of the burned homes.

The destroyed rooftop of a house burned by Cameroonian soldiers in Belo's Bobong neighborhood on June 11, 2022. © Private, Belo, North-West region, Cameroon, June 12, 2022

Human Rights Watch reviewed 29 photographs and 9 videos showing the burning of homes in these areas and consistent with accounts provided by witnesses.

Billy Burton, from the [Cameroon Database of Atrocities](#), a nonpartisan group of academic researchers and civic leaders, analyzed a 1-minute and 14-second [video](#) posted on Facebook showing a burned building. He geolocated the video in Sho, one of the areas targeted by the soldiers during their abusive operation, and reviewed satellite images showing the building intact before June 6 and burned out after that date.

A June 14 [report](#) by prominent Cameroonian human rights group, [Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa](#), also documents the military abuses in Belo, including the burning of homes, and looting of stores.

Destruction, Looting of a Community Health Center

A 43-year-old doctor said that soldiers attacked, damaged, and looted the health center where he used to work on June 10.

At about 9 a.m., I was at the health center with four patients. We heard gunshots. Suddenly, a bullet passed through the wall of the room where we were sitting. Blocks of the wall started falling down, as more bullets hit the wall. The room became dusty. We hid under the beds. Then, soldiers broke into the health center by destroying two iron doors. They took the patients out. They also took me out at gunpoint. They asked me questions about the amba [separatist fighters], like "Where are they? Do you know their positions?". They intimidated and threatened me with harm. Then, they started looting what they found in the center and ordered me to pack it.

Abusive Military Operation in Chomba

On June 8, regular army soldiers and BIR soldiers carried out an operation in Chomba searching for armed separatist fighters. During the operation, they arrested at least one woman and her 11-year-old foster child and burned a house. On June 12, they occupied, vandalized, and looted the local health center. Human Rights Watch spoke to three witnesses to the incident, two relatives, and the lawyer of those arrested, and reviewed a 46-second video showing the house set ablaze by the soldiers.

It is not the first time the military conducted abusive operations in Chomba, which is in a separatist-held area. Human Rights Watch [documented](#) that on December 10, 2021, BIR soldiers searched door-to-door in Chomba, gathered about 80 residents in the village square, accused them of harboring separatist fighters, and threatened them with death. The soldiers forcibly disappeared four villagers, two of them women, during the raid. They were found dead by villagers on December 29, 2021, with apparent gunshot wounds to their heads.

Arbitrary Detention and Extortion

During the military operation on June 8, soldiers arrested an 11-year-old boy and his foster mother. "Nobody knew where they had been taken, and for 24 hours we thought they had been killed, we were worried," a friend of their said. "Then, someone told me they had been taken to the BIR base in Bafut, so I informed the child's biological parents, who went there."

The child's biological mother said:

I went with my husband and an uncle to the BIR base in Bafut, on June 9. The military only allowed my husband and uncle in. They saw the child from a window but did not talk to him. They did not see the child's foster mother. They discussed with one BIR officer who said we should give him 500,000 CFA [USD \$777] to release the child. So, on June 10, before 3 p.m., we raised the money and gave it to him. But he didn't release my boy.

The lawyer representing the child and his foster mother told Human Rights Watch that the two were illegally detained at the BIR base in Bafut, about 25 kilometers from Chomba, from June 8 to July 3, when they were transferred to a gendarmerie station in Bamenda. He said that the child was released on July 3, while the mother was transferred to Bamenda's central prison on July 14 on charges of secession.

Occupation, Looting of the Local Health Center (June 12)

A nurse working at the Mbachongwa integrated health center – the only medical facility in Chomba and its surrounding villages – said that in the morning of June 12, more than 100 soldiers invaded the health center, vandalized it, looted important medical equipment and drugs, and occupied it until the following day. Two other Chomba residents and a local religious authority corroborated the account of the incident to Human Rights Watch.

The nurse said:

A four-month-pregnant woman came to my home for medical attention on June 12 at around 10 a.m. She was in a lot of pain, but I couldn't take her to the health center because the soldiers had invaded it and I was afraid. In the evening, as the woman continued to be very sick, I found courage and took her to the health center. Soldiers initially pushed us back, then let us in.

When I got into the center, I was shocked. Everything had been turned upside down. The mattresses were spread all over the place. The soldiers were everywhere, in all the rooms and wards, they were smoking, chatting, drinking, talking, cooking. I looked for the instruments I needed to check on the pregnant woman but didn't find any. The soldiers had taken them away. I went back home feeling desperate. The following morning the soldiers left. I called the doctor. We went back to the center, only to find out that the military had stolen important medical equipment and drugs.

ecoi.net summary:

Serious violations against
civilians by security forces



Country:

Cameroon

Source:

[HRW – Human Rights Watch](#)

Original link:

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/08/11/cameroon-army-killings-disappearances-north-west-region>

Document type:

Media Report

Language:

English

Published:

11 August 2022

Document ID:

2077401

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