

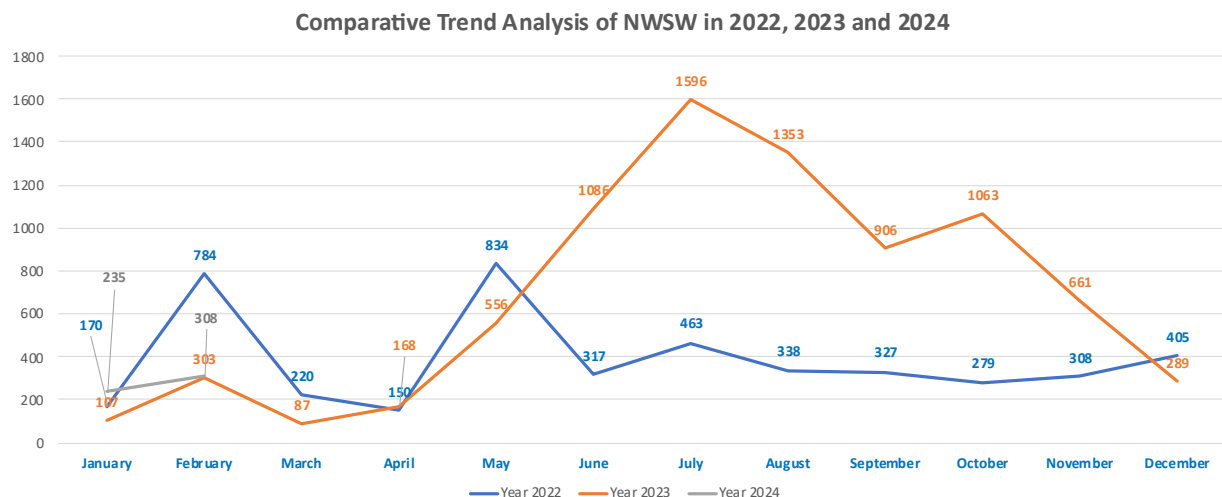
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## The Protection of Civilians Living Under Protracted Conflict in the Northwest and Southwest Regions of Cameroon: July 2023 - Feb 2024

### Protection Incident Trend Analysis: February 2024



### Overall Protection Environment

In Cameroon's North-West and South-West regions, the displaced population continue to face violations and abuses of their human rights from all parties to the crisis. The general security situation in the Northwest and Southwest regions deteriorated further in 2023, compared to 2022. The months of July to November 2023 witnessed a drastic spike in civilian casualties; with close to 100 civilians killed. 50 persons were killed in one single attack in Egbekaw in the Southwest region on 6<sup>th</sup> November, scores were injured, 15 houses burnt and over 400 persons displaced.

Protection monitoring recorded an alarming spate of attacks over a 3-week period from mid-October to the mid-November, causing civilian casualties in separate attacks in three regions. There was a change in the situation of in West region which had been relatively calm but became increasingly volatile due to proximity to the hotspots. The back-to-back attacks, were instigated by different reasons: reprisals in Egbekaw, SW; political grievances in the West and criminal activities in Bamenda in NW.

Additionally, during the period from July to November 2023 there was also a noticeable spike in the number of attacks on soft targets. Child Protection AoR actors reported 16 attacks carried out on schools (12) and 4 attacks on hospitals. Of the total, 4 attacks occurred between August and September 2023 alone. This underscores the flagrant violation of IHL where civilian sites continue to be targeted. This could constitute serious crimes against humanity and may even be a war crime. It is paramount that the principle of distinction and proportionality be respected by all parties to the conflict. To minimize civilian casualties.

This sharp deterioration in security in the NW&SW has seen repeated attacks on the displaced and host communities, evoking fear amongst the affected population, as well as restricting freedom of movement for responders, disrupts access to education for hundreds of thousands of children.

A comparative analysis between 2022 and 2023, show that by August 2023, some 4,787 incidents were recorded, which compares to the entire number of incidents in 2022, which stood at 4,584. A sampling of the cases shows that 898 were protection related incidents. Other sources of data include ACLED reports and UNDSS weekly situation reports. UNDSS reports indicated a 38% increase between August 2022 and August 2023. In sum, 2023, was a tough year for the protection of civilians and more concerted effort is needed to reverse this trend and enhance the protection of civilians.

The increase in security and protection incidents presents a grave concern as it adversely affects all facets of life for displaced populations in the Northwest and Southwest. July 2023 recorded the highest number of incidents with 1528 cases in any single month in one year. Protection monitoring data during the year showed that men and boys were most affected by human rights violations and abuses against the person, including unlawful/arbitrary arrest and detention, abduction. They face the destruction of property to provide information and or accused of supporting/spying for parties to the conflict. These two demographics faced constant threat to life and personal security, restriction of movement, and were also often targeted for killings, and or even summary executions, torture and inhumane treatment and extortion.

Human rights violations and abuses persisted with 80% of gender-based violence being perpetrated against internally displaced persons. Protection monitoring reports highlighted that women and girls were more prone and targeted for GBV type of crimes including sexual crimes, as evidenced by the number of cases reported, including physical assaults. Crimes of rape ranked quite high at 25% followed by the denial of resources. These crimes were mostly perpetrated against local populations by the NSAG as witnessed by cases of kidnappings/abductions of local community members and the killing of teachers working for the resumption of school activities in Mbessi, in Boyo division in September.

The NSAGs modus operandi remains the same and in the first quarter of 2024; that of targeted civilian populations and disrupting everyday lives by blocking public highways and stopping private and public vehicles plying the road to Donga Mantung, this route traverses the west region. The risk of not adhering to the lockdown orders has often seen civilians shot, killed, and/or wounded, and public transport system scuttled. At least 7 transport companies were suspended from operating in along this highway by the NSAG for not adhering to the lockdown orders, leaving many passengers stranded and disrupting commercial activities along major routes.

Consequently, normal lives and business could not go on during the two-week lockdown imposed by the NSAG to disrupt the resumption of the school year in September 2023. In Southwest region, widespread violations continued unabated in various localities, in Fako, 3 civilians were killed in Muea for defying lockdown orders, and a student was abducted in Bomaka, but was later released after his family paid the ransom price; a bike-rider was killed by an explosive device in Limbe. In Meme, a young girl was struck and killed by a stray bullet in Meme during confrontations between members of the community for aiding and abetting and/or failing to report the presence of NSAG. Military raids also continued through the months of July to October in Weme, Ngolobolo and Lobange, in the SW in the South-West and Big Babanki (Tubah/Mezam) and Bamali (Ndop/Ngoketunjia) in the North-West. The volatile situation erupted in November in the Egbekaw attack. The toll on civilian lives is quite high given the ongoing conflict and there are no indications that the situation will change drastically and or improve in 2024.

The protection environment remains volatile and hostile to civilian population caught in between this conflict. Protection monitors issued alerts on the rising incidents against the person, theft and willful destruction of property which rendered civilians insecure, desperate, and unable to rebuild their lives. Many parents in the NW and SW are constrained to send their children to the West and Littoral regions for safety and to pursue their education. This trend has resulted in family separation and children being sent to live with relatives in urban centres, where some children have been exploited, used as domestic workers, increased child labor, and subjected many to poor living conditions which in turn exposes these children to risks of sexual abuse and human trafficking.

**In February 2024, 308 protection incidents were recorded in the northwest and southwest regions, a 20% increase in from January 2024: Torture and inhumane treatment (91 incidents), destruction of property (57 incidents) and Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (41 incidents) were the top three reported incidents. 64.4% of the victims were male (including boys), while 35.6% were female (including girls).**

The presumed perpetrators remain NSAGs (52%), Security Forces (including police) (41.6%) and Civilians (6%).

Movement restrictions continued to be reported in the SW, due to either illegal roadblock by NSAG and checkpoints manned by the SSF. There are repeated cases of highway abductions of civilian boys and men by parties to the conflict, and an increase in armed clashes between NSAGs and State Security Forces. Extortion

of civilians by NSAGs remains a major preoccupation, as NSAGs continue to use this as a means of raising funds to continue their cause. Torture, threats to life and destruction of property are also used by NSAGs to ensure adherence to lockdown days as well as other ad hoc movement restrictions imposed by them.

Population movements triggered by military operations, armed clashes, and targeted attacks (fear of) were recorded in both regions in February. In the North-West region - **345 HHs (1771 indiv.)** were displaced within **Donga-Mantum, Momo and Menchum** divisions while **804 HHs (3997 indiv.)** were displaced within **Manyu** division in the South-West region. Pendular movements were also recorded in **Bui, Ngoketunja, Menchum, Donga Mantung** in the NW- **436 HHs (1932 indiv.)**, and in **Meme** division in the SW - **597HHs (4187 indiv.)**

Extortion and exploitation of the civilian populations continued to be reported in the NW&SW regions. At the beginning of February 2024, a notorious NSAG leader reportedly attempted to extort money from some communities by requesting villages around Upper-bayang sub-division in Manyu division of the SW region. The NSAG leader is reported to have demanded each community to pay him (ransom/illegal tax) 5,000,000 million FCFA before a set deadline of 18/02/2024 or he would start executing civilians in those villages. Since the villagers did not have the money as demanded, they lived in constant apprehension of what was to come. The situation escalated when the General sent a message on Thursday (15/02/2024) about pending executions. These threats forced the population of Ayukaba, and other surrounding villages in Upper Bayang sub-division in Manyu division to flee and spend a night in the bushes/forest, too fearful to return to their homes. These populations later fled to Mamfe town and Widikum in the North-west. In retaliation, the NSAGs resorted to burning down houses and other properties the vacated villages.

Some community members reportedly informed the SSF who set up an ambush on the NSAGs, resulting resulted in a serious confrontation which caused the death of 3 civilians caught up in the crossfire. The confrontation escalated to neighbouring Widikum sub-division in the NW, which borders upper-bayang sub-division in the SW. This also triggered further displacement of the remaining population in villages in upper bayang sub-division in the SW, including 3 villages (Anjankie, Menda, Mantoh) in Widikum sub-division of the NW region who fled for safety to Diche 1 in Widikum (with some being hosted at the D.O's office). The situation has remained tense and volatile and has impacted humanitarian access and services to the displaced persons in need.

Humanitarian needs are many and affected populations face severe restriction on accessing basic services, including the critical protection needs, physical security and enjoyment of fundamental freedoms such as the freedom of movement, food scarcity, inadequate shelter, lack of/and access to healthcare services, lack of NFIs, and insufficient WASH facilities.

## Response

Despite, the unfavorable environment, in February 2024, the protection actors reached 3,477 persons with various protection services, namely 973 on peacebuilding and social cohesion; 840 individuals were reached with non-specialized group counselling; reporting of violations and incidents recorded by protection monitoring, 387 and protection monitoring covered 320; some 178 individuals were provided legal assistance and another 97 received legal aid and counselling; 176 children were assisted and issued with birth certificates and 35 individuals received assistance with civil status registration. 153 women and men were covered by awareness raising on centrality of protection.

Child Protection actors with services ranging from MHPSS, issuance of birth certificates, case management and GBV risk mitigation and prevention.

GBV AoR carried out safety audits in NWSW, established referral pathway (2023) and published the Voices of Women Report at during the first quarter of 2024. The report has been under compilation since 2022 but only recently received the clearance from the government, MINPROFF, to publish the report. This could be a signal that there is a change on the part of the government taking seriously the responsibility for the actions of state security forces in addressing conflict related sexual violence.

HLP AoR sensitized 624 community members and leaders (157 NW and 467 FN) on their HLP rights and obligation, provided legal counselling to 242 individuals (89 NW and 153 FN) with specific HLP issues and legal Assistance to 50 people, mostly women in Mayo Sava division of the Far North region to help them secure land for agricultures and housing. The AoR also trained 129 local and traditional authorities (29 in the NW and 100

in the FN) on HLP and Collaborative Disputes Resolution to enable them to facilitate access to land for affected populations and protect their HLP rights. To improve access to land for displaced persons, the AoR organized meetings with local authorities in Widikum and lobbied them to provide farmlands to displaced women.

### **Key Messages and Recommendations**

- Advocacy with central government and military echelons on the responsibility to protect civilians and take mitigating measures for the protection of civilians and reduce civilian casualties.
- Lobby for support for humanitarians to have unfettered access to persons in need and in hard-to-reach areas.
- Open a dialogue/discussion and training on the obligation of duty bearers to respect international human rights law, international humanitarian law and refugee law by all parties to the conflict. Organize joint training for law enforcement and security organs on responsibility to protect and respect for humanitarian principles.