



**CAMEROON:**  
**ANOTHER YEAR OF DETERIORATING HUMAN RIGHTS**  
**Testimony from Amnesty International USA**  
**Before the House Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights**  
**and International Organizations**  
**by Adotei Akwei**

**June 27, 2018**

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass and other members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of Amnesty International USA I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify before this Committee. Your consistent leadership on issues related to Africa, human rights and US Africa policy has been and continues to be essential and is greatly appreciated by Amnesty International USA and its members.

Amnesty International is a global human rights moment established in 1961 with 7 million members and supporters. We have a presence in 70 countries and have offices in Dakar, Nairobi, Johannesburg and Abuja.

Mr. Chairman and Ranking member Bass the human rights situation in Cameroon is alarming, it is worsening, and the government of President Paul Biya--who has been in power for over 30 years-- has to date, shown little inclination or political will to effectively address the crisis. While briefings like this one shine a critical spotlight on the issue, it is time for friends of Cameroon and bodies like the US Congress to strengthen their calls for the government to initiate genuine, credible reform with clear bench marks to improve the livelihoods of Cameroonians, and the stability of the region and the global community. This is even more urgent with Cameroon scheduled to hold elections in October and the ongoing Boko Haram insurgency in the Far North and massive violence and unrest in the North and South West regions of the country. I know that the members of this Committee fully appreciate the difficulties of creating conditions for free and fair election at any given moment. Trying to do so with conflict and violence on two different fronts at the same time,

should give pause to all the friends of Cameroon and spur us to pressing for genuine reforms now.

### 3. Key human rights concerns in the last 12 months

#### a) Conflict between the Cameroonian security forces and Boko Haram

For the last four years, Cameroon has been in conflict with the armed group Boko Haram. The group's attacks have killed more than [20,000](#)<sup>1</sup> people and displaced 2.7 million during the group's eight-year fight to carve out an Islamic caliphate in the Lake Chad region. In the last two years, from January 2016 to date, Amnesty International has recorded over 350 Boko Haram's-related incidents in the Far North region of Cameroon, including 76 suicide bombings – which led to the loss of hundreds of lives and the widespread destruction of private and public property. Because of the conflict, over [240,000](#) people have been internally displaced between 2014 – 2017 in the Far North region of Cameroon<sup>2</sup>.

Amnesty International believes that Boko Haram has committed war crimes and crimes against humanity in addition to abductions, recruitment of child soldiers, summary executions, including suicide [bombings](#) in civilian areas, looting, destruction of public and private property, forced recruitment and kidnapping of men, women, boys and girls.

#### b) The Government's counter insurgency

The list of atrocities committed by Boko Haram is as horrific [as](#) it is extensive<sup>3</sup>. Unfortunately, there are also ongoing human rights violations perpetrated by the Cameroonian security forces including reports of unlawful killings, extra-judicial executions, systematic torture and use of excessive force, all of which hurt the very

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<sup>1</sup> Suspected Boko Haram fighters kill 11 in Cameroon, Al- Jazeera, August 25, 2017

<sup>2</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/06.21.18%20-%20USAID-DCHA%20Lake%20Chad%20Basin%20Complex%20Emergency%20Fact%20Sheet%20%2317.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> SECRET TORTURE CHAMBERS IN CAMEROON, AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, JULY 11, 2017

people security forces are meant to protect. The Cameroonian security forces have arbitrarily accused hundreds of people of supporting Boko Haram and subjected them to arbitrary and incommunicado detention and [torture](#)<sup>4</sup> [which were documented by Amnesty International, in its reports “\[Cameroon's Secret Torture Chambers\]\(#\)”<sup>5</sup>, “\[Right Cause, Wrong Means\]\(#\)”<sup>6</sup>, and \[Human Rights Under Fire\]\(#\)<sup>7</sup>.](#)

Most of the victims were Muslim, Cameroonian men from the Kanuri ethnic group between the ages of 18 and 45 from [the Far North region](#)<sup>8</sup>. Amnesty documented over 100 cases of secret detention and torture between late 2013 – and mid-2017, at over 20 different sites (mainly illegal detention facilities, such as military bases, in the Far North Region, but also in facilities belonging to the Cameroonian secret services in Yaounde). Though the majority of victims are men, women and children have also been subjected to incommunicado detention and torture. Despite these reports of torture, the Biya government has yet to initiate [investigations](#) of those possibly involved in torture and other human rights violations.<sup>9</sup> In addition to the possible involvement of the Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR)—Cameroon’s army elite unit--and the General Directorate of External Research (DGRE) in the reported incidents of incommunicado detention, torture and death in custody, the government has also enforced a ban on full-faced veils, periodically shut down its borders, shut down the internet and placed restrictions on movements of vehicles and people. Although the military’s response to Boko Haram’s tactics has been vociferously defended, there is growing concern that systematic and widespread [human rights](#)<sup>10</sup> violations by the security forces may have fed radicalization, leading some to join

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<sup>4</sup> Cameroon: Amnesty report reveals war crimes in fight against Boko Haram, including horrific use of torture, Amnesty International, July 20, 2017

<sup>5</sup> CAMEROON'S SECRET TORTURE CHAMBERS: HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AND WAR CRIMES IN THE FIGHT AGAINST BOKO HARAM, AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL,

<sup>6</sup> Right Cause, Wrong Means, Amnesty International, July 13, 2016

<sup>7</sup> Human Rights Under Fire, Amnesty International, September 26, 2015

<sup>8</sup> SECRET TORTURE CHAMBERS IN CAMEROON

<sup>9</sup> Cameroon: Amnesty report reveals war crimes in fight against Boko Haram, including horrific use of torture

<sup>10</sup> Cameroon: Amnesty report reveals war crimes in fight against Boko Haram, including horrific use of torture

the armed [group](#), as well as contributing to fear and distrust of the military among local communities.

The reports were alarming enough that the United States African Military Command (AFRICOM), launched an investigation into the possible knowledge of acts of torture being committed by the Cameroonian forces by U.S. military personnel that were located at the Cameroonian bases -especially the one near Maroua known as Salak- where routine torture took place and was documented by Amnesty International. The results of the investigation have yet to be publicly released, and Congress must press for that to be rectified. The report must be publicly released, not only to find out if any US military personnel were aware of the torture, but also to convey to the Cameroonian authorities how seriously the United States takes this issue. The UN Committee against Torture also echoed Amnesty's concerns and called on the Cameroonian government to put an end to the widespread use of torture by security forces fighting Boko Haram.<sup>11</sup>

c) Restrictions on freedom of expression, association and assembly

In addition to the crimes under international law and human rights violations committed by the Cameroonian security forces in the counter insurgency against Boko Haram, since late 2016 Cameroon has also been roiled by protests, especially by the Anglophone community and activists, and the government has pursued a brutal crackdown on top of an already poor human rights environment. The government continued to try to silence journalists, human rights defenders, including civil society activists, trade unionists, lawyers, teachers and students. These human rights violations have been consistent throughout Biya's term in office but during the last 12 months the level of repression worsened dramatically.

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<sup>11</sup> UN Committee tells Cameroon to put an end to torture by security forces in the fight against Boko Haram, Amnesty International December 6, 2017

Since October 2016, protests and strikes related to the demands made by the Anglophone minority have been met with [harassment](#)<sup>12</sup>, threats, arbitrary arrests, and use of excessive and unnecessary force by security forces.

At least 10 peaceful protestors were killed by the security forces between October 2016 and February 2017<sup>13</sup>, with anglophone activist groups using civil disobedience tactics, including school boycotts and “ghost town” protests.

At least [20 protesters](#) were shot by security forces in the Anglophone regions between September 22<sup>nd</sup> and October 1<sup>st</sup> of 2017<sup>14</sup> and more than 500 people were arbitrarily arrested and packed like sardines in overcrowded detention centers.<sup>15</sup> Others wounded in the protests were forced to flee hospitals where they sought life-saving treatment out of fear of arrest or killing. Hundreds were arrested, and thousands fled their homes, becoming internally displaced or refugees in Nigeria

The Anglophone minority have claimed political and economic [marginalization](#) and have protested for decades over the lack of opportunity, resources, and political representation. The Anglophone community are also critical of having the French language and legal standards forced on them, as well as the “francophonization” of Common Law and the educational system.

The initial, largely peaceful, protests were met with fierce and sustained repression from the Cameroonian authorities and security forces leading to the arrest of hundreds of people, including human rights defenders, journalists and activists, the banning of civil society organizations, the suspension of the internet and the cutting of cut phone lines for several months in late 2016 and 2017.

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<sup>12</sup> Cameroon’s Anglophone Crisis at the Crossroads, International Crisis Group, August 2, 2017

<sup>13</sup> Cameroon’s Worsening Anglophone Crisis Calls for Strong Measures, International Crisis Group, October 19, 2017

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2017/10/cameroon-worrying-reports-of-deaths-in-protests-in-the-anglophone-regions/>; <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/10/cameroon-inmates-packed-like-sardines-in-overcrowded-prisons-following-anglophone-protests/>;

<sup>15</sup> Amnesty International believes that these numbers might be very underestimated

The heavy-handed response by the security forces contributed to the emergence of more radical, violent groups, calling for secession and embracing the armed struggle. They began to attack the Cameroonian security forces and state emblems, and perpetrated violent acts that also impacted the general population.

According to government sources, armed separatists have killed over 80 members of the security forces since last year, in both the North West and South West regions<sup>16</sup>.

Ordinary citizens have been targeted as well: teachers and students accused of not participating in the boycott have been physically assaulted, and Amnesty International said that at least 42 schools have been attacked by armed separatists from February 2017 to May 2018 in both the North West and South West regions.<sup>17</sup>

The escalation of this violence by the armed separatists by the end of 2017 coincided with the militarization of the Anglophone regions, the creation of a new 5th military region with its headquarter in Bamenda, and the military's launch of large-scale security operations in parts of North West and South West regions. On December 1, 2017, for example, the Senior Divisional Officer of Manyu Division, South West region, issued a communiqué ordering people living in 15 villages of the area to “relocate to safer neighborhoods of their choice in the hours that follow, failure of which they will be treated as accomplices or perpetrators of ongoing criminal occurrences registered on security and defense forces”. Before this communiqué was withdrawn the following day, residents of the cited villages had already fled. When the security forces entered some of these villages, they used excessive force to locate and arrest those who had stayed behind.

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<sup>16</sup> SEPARATISTS HAVE KILLED 84 TROOPS SINCE SEPTEMBER 2017: CAMEROON, EYEWITNESS NEWS, JUNE 21, 2018

<sup>17</sup> A Turn for the Worse: Violence and Human Rights Violations in Anglophone Cameroon, Amnesty International, June 11, 2018

The Cameroonian security forces have also razed numerous villages<sup>18</sup>. Amnesty International documented the destruction of Kwakwa in January 2018 and Azi in April 2018 both of which were corroborated using satellite imagery used in the report. Satellite images and photographic evidence obtained by Amnesty International show the complete destruction of the village of Kwakwa, in the South West region, which was burnt to the ground by Cameroonian security forces during an operation conducted in December 2017 in connection with the killing of two gendarmes by suspected armed separatists. AI documented the destruction of Azi, in the South west, based on 5 videos that became public on April 30<sup>th</sup> and that showed the burning and looting of homes by Cameroonian soldiers in Azi. Amnesty was able to geo-locate videos and verify the incident in the video through satellite imagery. Local civil society organizations have reported that over 70 villages have been burnt by the Cameroonian army. We have not been able to confirm or deny these allegations until the regions

d) Arbitrary Detention:

The Biya government has also banned political parties, canceled hearings that critiqued or opposed government policies, revoked permits for demonstrations, and arbitrarily arrested people. Arrests have been made for peaceful protests where the detained were held in isolation, charged under the heavily flawed 2014 anti-terrorism law, without formal charges.

For example, in October 2017, a military court of law condemned [Aboubakar Siddiki](#)<sup>19</sup>, a critic of President Biya and the head of the small Cameroon's Patriotic Salvation Movement, of attempting to incite a revolution, and sentenced him to 25 years in prison after a deeply unfair trial.

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<sup>18</sup> Burning Cameroon: Images you're not meant to see, BBC News, June 25, 2018

<sup>19</sup> Cameroon, Freedom in the World 2018, Freedom House, January 16, 2018

Another case that Amnesty has been working is that of [Fomusoh Ivo Feh](#)<sup>20</sup> a college student was arrested in December 2014 and sentenced to 10 years in prison for forwarding a private joke via text message about Boko Haram. Fomusoh, Afuh Nivelle Nfor and Azah Levis Gob were kept in shackles for four months while their hearing was delayed seven months.<sup>21</sup> The three students were found guilty of ‘non-denunciation of terrorism-related information’ on November 2, 2016.

The human rights concerns that my fellow panelists and I are sharing today are echoed by the US Department of State in its 2017 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for Cameroon. In that report the State department highlighted “Arbitrary Deprivation of Life, Disappearance, Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Prison and Detention Center Conditions, Arbitrary Arrest or Detention, Denial of Fair Public Trial, Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence, Freedom of Religion, Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association, and Freedom of Expression, including for the [Press](#).”<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, Cameroon is in crisis and the Biya regime appears to believe that it can weather Boko Haram’s insurgency while trying to crush protests driven by the increasing anger and frustration of the anglophone speaking population. The United States, Africa and the international community cannot afford to make that gamble, and the people of Cameroon deserve better.

The common factor in both the crises are the security forces and the Cameroonian government. Cameroon’s security forces have a long track record of abusive

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<sup>20</sup> Cameroon: Thousands worldwide demand release of students jailed for sharing Boko Haram joke, Amnesty International May 23, 2017

<sup>21</sup> Cameroon: Thousands worldwide demand release of students jailed for sharing Boko Haram joke

<sup>22</sup> [Cameroon Country Report](#), Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2017, United States Department of State



conduct, both in the Far North and in the Anglophone regions. We have documented numerous cases in the Far North where the security forces have arbitrarily killed, or arrested civilians suspected of supporting Boko Haram, and made widespread use of incommunicado detention and torture. The impunity with which such acts were committed in the Far North region, may have been a significant contributing factor to the commission of similar violations in the Anglophone regions.

Members of the subcommittee, the violence in the Anglophone regions is escalating. Dozens of attacks have been perpetrated by the armed separatists in the last 2 months and the army has responded brutally. Dozens have been killed. It also appears that the violence will enter a new phase of greater brutality with urban battles and the use of heavy weapons by the army and more sophisticated weapons by the armed separatists.

Failing to end the culture of impunity will leave the country stuck on a path where it is at best at risk of losing the support of the Cameroonian people in the Far North, at worst helping Boko Haram recruit members, and in the South eliminating or marginalizing moderate voices while leaving larger swathes of the country destabilized and in need of humanitarian assistance and political instability.

#### Recommendations

The United States and the friends of the country must work together to press the Biya government to enact meaningful, measurable reforms including:

- Launching independent, impartial, thorough investigations into all allegations of crimes under international law and human rights violations committed in the Far North by the security forces and into the abuses perpetrated by Boko Haram, as well as into the human rights violations committed by the security forces and the acts of violence perpetrated by the armed separatists in the Anglophone regions.
- Taking the necessary measures to prevent excessive and unnecessary use of force, arbitrary and incommunicado detention, torture, deaths in custody, enforced disappearances, and inhumane prison conditions.

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- Respecting and protecting the human rights of all people living in Cameroon as guaranteed by Cameroonian Constitution and Cameroon's international human rights obligations, including releasing Human Rights Defenders, civil society activists, political prisoners, journalists, trade unionists and teachers arbitrarily arrested and / or detained without charges<sup>23</sup>
- Allowing unrestricted access for UN Rapporteurs and experts, human rights groups and humanitarian organizations to the country to conduct needs' assessments and investigations.
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- Strongly condemn the human rights violations committed by the government of Cameroon and its security forces, including against members of the English-speaking minority and against alleged members of Boko Haram, as well as acts of violence by armed separatist groups, and urge the Cameroonian authorities to investigate all the allegations of human rights violations committed in the Far North and in the Anglophone regions and take the necessary measures to prevent arbitrary and incommunicado detention, torture, deaths in custody enforced disappearances, and inhumane prison conditions.
- Calling upon the Government of Cameroon to respect and protect the human rights of all people living in Cameroon as guaranteed by Cameroon's international human rights obligations including release Human Rights Defenders, and civil society activists, political prisoners, journalists, trade unionists and teachers arbitrarily arrested and detained without charge.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhumane or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights

<sup>24</sup> the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhumane or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights

- Press the Cameroonian authorities to ensure that the security forces only use force when strictly necessary and only to the minimum extent required under the circumstances. Lethal force should not be used except when strictly unavoidable to protect life, and clear order should be issued to the military, the gendarmes and the police commanders to immediately cease the use of excessive force in the context of cordon and search operations and peaceful demonstrations and ensure security forces comply with international human rights law and standards on the use of force.
  
- Demand the security forces of Cameroon to cease the arbitrary arrests of alleged Boko Haram supporters, with no set charges and no due process. The Cameroonian security forces must abide by due process and respect the rule of law. All people who are arrested should have proper proof of wrongdoing and should not be in any way deemed arbitrary. The Government of Cameroon must investigate all instances of arbitrary arrests done by their security forces and appropriately enforce the rule of law on its citizens and security forces.

Thank you