ISSUE 3

NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS AND ILLICIT ECONOMIES IN WEST AFRICA

Anglophone separatists

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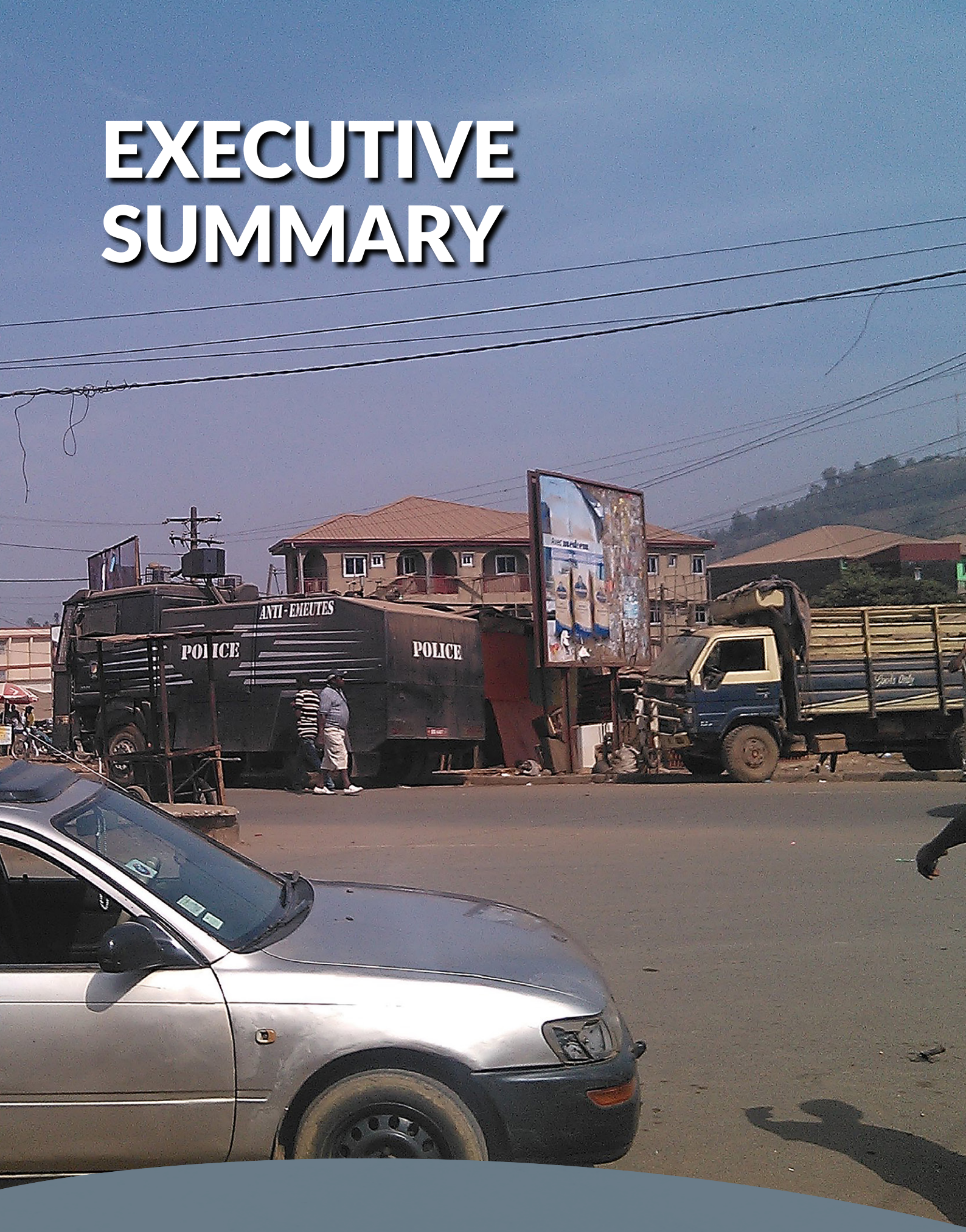
ACRONYMS

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project
ADF	Ambazonia Defence Forces
AGC/AGovC	Ambazonia Governing Council
ASDC	Ambazonia Self-Defence Council
ANIF	Agence Nationale d'Invéstigation Financière
CACSC	Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium
GI-TOC	Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime
IG	Interim Government of Ambazonia
IPOB	Indigenous People of Biafra
LGA	Local government area
SCNC	Southern Cameroons National Council

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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This report offers a contemporary analysis of the operations, the organization, the involvement in illicit economies and the financing of the Anglophone separatist armed groups in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon, as well as their relationships with civilian communities. Drawing on interviews and ACLED event data, the report provides an in-depth picture of the current organization of the Anglophone armed separatist movement, and its operations and use of violence. The report also offers new insights into the separatists' financing, and specifically their engagement with illicit economies in Northwest and Southwest Cameroon. The separatists' relations with civilians are examined throughout the discussions on their organization, operations and economic activities.

The report finds that divisions and infighting among Anglophone separatist groups, alongside escalating civilian targeting, diminished the confidence of the pro-separatist Anglophone Cameroonian diaspora and reduced critical financial support for the separatist cause. In response to the reduced international financial support, separatist groups increasingly kidnap civilians to fund their operations and demand various forms of taxation, while implicating themselves in other illicit economies. This has contributed to the fragmentation of the conflict: As of 2023, there were 50 armed groups that identify with the Anglophone separatist cause.

These factors have collectively eroded the effectiveness of the separatist demands for independence from the government in Yaoundé. The fragmentation of the separatist movement, and fighters' ill-treatment of civilians, has damaged their credibility as a negotiating partner, as well as their capacity to act as one. Both government forces and separatist fighters have worsened the prospect for a peaceful resolution of the conflict by engaging in human rights abuses, and by reacting with force to dissenting political expression.[1] These factors have in turn diminished the political space for other Anglophone representatives to negotiate for more moderate concessions. They have also appeared to hamper consultations with Anglophones around political designs, and the reform of the Special Status framework granted to the Anglophone provinces in 2019.[2]

Due to the rising number of uncoordinated armed groups, the level of organization and leadership varies among the separatists. Some groups have a more hierarchical organizational structure, with connections and funding from diaspora political leaders or groups referring to themselves as governments. Many other armed separatists operating in the Anglophone region operate in smaller armed groups of fewer than 30 fighters, with more localized political and economic ambitions. These are becoming especially common amid the fragmentation of the conflict. The more organized separatists tend to be those who have managed to retain some diaspora support – both political and material – while the smaller, more fragmented groups engage more frequently in ad hoc illicit activities, such as smuggling or extortion. However, both types of groups engage in heavy taxation and extortion of local populations, including on their illicit activities.

Due to the ongoing conflict and competing territorial claims by separatist groups and the government in Yaoundé, Anglophone Cameroon has become a patchwork of taxation, security and public service provision (or lack thereof), provided by numerous uncoordinated actors – including separatist groups, the Yaoundé government, the private sector and humanitarian organizations. Rather than engage in effective governance themselves, a key strategy of Anglophone armed groups for independence has been to make governance difficult for Yaoundé by destroying public property, infrastructure and other vital economic resources. Separatists also violently target civilians who will not support the Anglophone cause.

The report concludes by considering potential future outcomes of the separatist conflict. Internal competition and diminishing capacity of separatist groups will likely hinder any progress towards the independence of the Anglophone region. The strategic significance of the Anglophone region's natural resources – including oil, timber and highly fertile agricultural land[3] – makes concessions for full autonomy improbable, while civilian targeting by both separatist fighters and state forces perpetuates tensions. At present, there appears to be little political will within the Yaoundé government to offer more substantial political concessions to the Anglophone provinces. However, the overall growth of political violence in 2023 and so far in 2024 in the Anglophone region signals the increasing need for just and durable political settlements.

INTRODUCTION

The surge of armed conflict in the Anglophone region of Cameroon[4] broke out in October 2017 after separatist groups unilaterally announced their secession from the Francophone government in Yaoundé and the formation of a separate state in the Anglophone region, which they called Ambazonia. The call for independence by separatist groups followed widespread demonstrations throughout 2016 by civil society organizations, demanding an end to economic, political and cultural discrimination that they felt was being imposed by the government in Yaoundé against the Anglophone region.[5] Armed violence in this region escalated after October 2017, when state forces cracked down on those they perceived as secessionists, resulting in several deaths and hundreds of arrests.[6]

Initially, Anglophone separatist groups received significant financial support through networks in the diaspora of English-speaking Cameroonians.[7] Their aims focused on gaining political power in the Anglophone region as an independent country, or obtaining stronger forms of federalism. Some separatist groups initially took control over civilian communities and provided English-speaking education, local justice mechanisms, inputs for crops and security – especially from the onset of the conflict in 2017 to 2019.[8] While diaspora support continues to be an important revenue stream for some Anglophone separatist groups, funding has substantially diminished since 2019 in the wake of several factors, including increasing violence towards civilians by armed separatist groups; rising cynicism around diaspora mobilization efforts; and a clampdown on financial transfers being sent to armed groups. As a result, armed separatist groups have increasingly, and opportunistically, involved themselves in a variety of illicit economies to fund their activities, including kidnap for ransom, taxation and extortion, smuggling and arms trafficking. Armed groups are now increasingly relying on illicit economies as a source of financing after they lost external financial support – a pattern similar to the evolution of many non-state armed groups, such as Chadian rebel groups after Sudan ceased financial support in 2010.[9]

In recent years, the conflict in the Anglophone region continued to escalate amid rising fragmentation of the separatist cause. Violent incidents in Northwest and Southwest regions grew by 69% in 2023 compared to the previous year – the largest annual escalation since 2020. Separatists continue to split into distinct groups and fail to make alliances, creating adversarial relationships with other Anglophone groups. Further, additional armed groups have joined the violence, including increased mobilization of communal and ethnic militias. Amid increasing danger to the local population, civilian targeting rose by 83% in 2023 relative to 2022. The conflict in the Anglophone region eclipsed insurgent violence in Extreme-North in 2018, as violence in the Anglophone region grew from less than a quarter of Cameroon's total political violence events in 2017 to over 70% in 2023. Overall, insecurity in the Anglophone region has led to the internal displacement of over 1 million people, with similar numbers of people displaced to other parts of Cameroon and into Nigeria.[10]

This report examines how the declining capacity of armed separatists to sustain legitimacy has led to increasing coercion, in order to exert their power and influence locally. The Anglophone diaspora lost a degree of trust in the Anglophone fighters, and their willingness to financially support Anglophone armed groups has been reduced due to separatists' civilian targeting, factionalization and infighting among separatists. The loss of diaspora financing stimulated the negative feedback loop of separatist groups further increasing the targeting of civilians for taxation or kidnap for ransom to fund their operations. Despite this, the ongoing violence by state forces continues to provide some Anglophones justification to support an armed separatist movement.[11]

Methodology

This report marks the third instalment in a series of reports examining the central role of illicit economies within the broader spectrum of armed group governance. This series is a collaborative effort between the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) and the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), stemming from a growing awareness of the central role illicit economies play in the strategies of armed groups in West Africa.

To ensure a comprehensive understanding, this report draws on a broad array of primary and secondary sources. It builds upon on-the-ground data collection conducted in Cameroon by ACLED since 1997, and research by ACLED and the GI-TOC over the past year. Simultaneously, it reflects years-long discussions with monitors and informants in Cameroon.

Further interviews were conducted in 2023 by GI-TOC researchers in Douala and Yaoundé, and additional interviews were conducted by consultant researchers in Northwest and Southwest provinces. Interviews spanned a diverse range of individuals, including armed group members, community members, those with specific knowledge of illicit economies and academics working on the conflict in the Anglophone region. White papers were commissioned by a small number of experts with strong networks in the Anglophone provinces. Further interviews were conducted with a host of stakeholders, from the Cameroonian government and the international community to local organizations and associations, and victims of violence from armed groups and organized crime.

Alongside these primary sources, a comprehensive review of grey literature, academic and media sources was undertaken, with a particular focus on monitoring and analyzing Anglophone separatist media channels and communications. Key to this research is the extraction and analysis of data from ACLED and research from the GI-TOC's West Africa observatory.

ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF THE ANGLOPHONE CONFLICT

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While unrest in the Anglophone region broke out in 2016, the historical origins date back to Cameroon's transition from colonial rule to early independence. The Francophone government in Yaoundé had been perceived as neglecting economic development in Anglophone Cameroon for decades, particularly in the wake of a wave of sell-offs and privatizations of major corporations in western Cameroon, and the abandonment of proposed infrastructure and development projects.[12] There was likewise unequal access to justice and education for Anglophones, since English-language legal materials were unavailable, French was spoken in courtrooms, and Anglophone teachers were not allowed to teach Anglophone students in English.[13]

The separatist movement developed from several distinct groups and interests, sometimes coordinating for mutual benefit, but often operating independently or in opposition to one another. While a general outcry against the discrimination of the Anglophone region was voiced by demonstrators and used to rally resistance in 2016 and 2017, deep divisions within the Anglophone movement limited the development of a unified Anglophone voice.[14] The following section examines the origins of the Anglophone and Francophone divisions, which gave way to the Anglophone political movement during the political party mobilization in the 1990s. Next, this section looks at the escalating demonstrations in 2016 and 2017 that erupted into widespread armed conflict. Lastly, this section concludes by looking at the evolution of political violence from 2020 to the present.

Colonial and post-colonial divisions: 1960–2016

The grievances underpinning the Anglophone conflict stem from the end of colonial rule in 1960 and 1961 by France and the United Kingdom, respectively, which combined the British colony of Southern Cameroons with French Cameroon into a two-state federation: East and West Cameroon. East and West Cameroon retained the many forms of political, social and legal institutions from their colonial predecessors, such as having a separate prime minister in West Cameroon and using the Common Law system, compared to the presidential system and Civil Law in East Cameroon.[15] The federal government system was abolished shortly afterward in 1972, and this enabled forms of economic and legal discrimination against the Anglophone region by the Francophone government in Yaoundé.[16] Specifically, economic policies favoured the Francophone region, the education and public sector emphasized the French language, and challenges persisted in recognizing the two legal systems, such as the lack of a bench for Common Law at the Supreme Court.[17]

Grievances among the Anglophone population swelled, leading to increasing Anglophone political demands in the post-independence period, and even more so during the turn to a multi-party system in the 1990s. New demands to secure Anglophone participation in national and political life by protecting and promoting the official use of the English language, which would allow Anglophones a more secure stake in Cameroon from the Anglophone population, were expressed in the 1990s through both peaceful political organization and more militant mobilization.[18] However, such mobilization also led to a perception of a distinct Anglophone Cameroonian identity. This identity competed with the 'unified' national identity being espoused by Francophone Cameroon and the Yaoundé government.[19] Anglophones increasingly demanded forms of self-governance in Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon.[20]

This period was formative not only in broadening Anglophone political mobilization, but also in forming relationships between militancy, illicit economies, criminal behaviour and governance in the form of order-making by armed groups.[21] In the wake of the transition to a multi-party system in the early 1990s, Anglophone youth activists gained traction but coincided with opportunities for more militant forms of organization. These included the communal militias known as 'Anti-Gang' groups – purportedly anti-criminal efforts, which aimed to respond to high levels of local crime and to defend

communities against the violent tactics used by security forces against Anglophone demonstrations.[22] As Anti-Gang movements cracked down on criminality – sometimes violently – they often framed their actions as a civic service, while also engaging in violent and illicit behaviour themselves. Some of these groups served as forerunners to Anglophone armed groups and the development of armed criminality. Indeed, Anti-Gang groups suffered from the same legitimacy challenges of the later armed separatists, stemming from a lack of unity and high levels of violence against the civilians they were nominally protecting. Instead of defending communities from criminal groups and violence by state forces, Anti-Gang groups increasingly lost the confidence of local communities by fighting one another, targeting civilians and engaging in criminal behaviour.[23]

Some Anti-Gang groups who were sympathetic to the Anglophone cause used their capacity for violence to force adherence to disruptive measures against the Yaoundé government, such as strikes and 'ghost town' protests – a call to remain at home as a political action to raise awareness regarding the injustices in the Anglophone region, which became a tactic often deployed by Anglophone armed groups.[24] The Anti-Gang groups would also violently regulate behaviours considered immoral or dangerous.[25] This included violent punishment for drinking, gambling and prostitution – the latter considered a threat to society due to the spread of HIV at the time in Northwest region's capital city of Bamenda.[26] However, by the mid-1990s, many of the Anti-Gang movements had lost the initial community support because of their own criminal behaviour.

Anti-Gang members also became involved in the new multiparty phase of Cameroon's political life, particularly in the form of more radical youth wings of parties. The creation of the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC) in 1994 served as a new focus for youth organizers. While the SCNC itself enjoyed wide support in mainstream Anglophone society, the SCNC Youth Wing became a home for the more radically inclined. While some members of the Youth Wing were student leaders, particularly from the English-speaking University of Buea, the Youth Wing also absorbed a number of former Anti-Gang militants.[27] While both the SCNC and the SCNC Youth Wing engaged in organization and demonstrations, the latter's demonstrations often resulted in violent clashes between law enforcement and demonstrators.

Escalating unrest gives rise to armed conflict: 2016–2017

The political demands and occasional violence of the 1990s and 2000s turned to widespread demonstrations in 2016, as lawyers, judges and teachers organized against perceived changes from the Francophone government in Yaoundé to alter the Anglophone region's legal and educational systems. The planned appointment by the Yaoundé government of Francophone judges in the Anglophone region prompted demonstrations by many groups under the Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium (CACSC) in October 2016. While a transition to federalism was the demand of many organizers, a widespread call for separatism also emerged. In January 2017, the CACSC began the first of many ghost town orders and demonstrators increasingly voiced concerns over the lack of bilingual opportunities in education and the public sector.[28]

Small groups of militantly inclined Anglophone activists formed in late 2016 and early 2017, often using WhatsApp and social media to identify alleged breaches of ghost town orders, and urging members to violently punish perpetrators.[29] On the other side, arrests, beatings and incursions by security forces – both in cities and into villages – against suspected Anglophone agitators became increasingly common in 2017.[30] Violence by security forces against civilians prompted the mobilization of village-level self-defence groups, mostly made up of young people armed with machetes or stones.[31] While some may have held broader ambitions, there was little coordination beyond the village level during the early mobilization against violence by state forces.[32] The initial local coordination between self-defence groups resembled their Anti-Gang predecessors, but groups became increasingly connected to broader secessionist political groups and command structures claiming an independent Anglophone state.

Following a ban on 17 January 2017 by the Yaoundé government on the SCNC and the SCNC Youth Wing,[33] many Youth Wing members joined self-defence groups. Such groups, often known as Amba Boys, received increased support from the diaspora to defend locals against violence by state forces. A number of individuals who became fundraisers in diaspora communities for armed action, or vocal champions of Amba Boys on social media were former SCNC Youth Wing members.[34] Information about the harsh repression of the demonstrations by state forces was being widely shared with the Anglophones living outside of Cameroon.[35] This prompted increased support from the diaspora – largely in Belgium, Canada, Nigeria, South Africa and the United States – for

self-defence groups to protect civilians. It also led to calls for a coordinated secessionist movement.[36]

As with many of the Anglophone political movements, the remnants of the SCNC were marked by splits and divisions, including among diaspora leaders.[37] Political groups developed in competition, aiming to become the sole representative of the Anglophone separatist cause. The two most prominent were the Interim Government of Ambazonia (IG) and the Ambazonia Governing Council (AGC or AGovC). The IG coordinated several armed groups under the Ambazonia Self-Defence Council (ASDC). Rivalling the IG, the AGC also aimed to establish a government over English-speaking Cameroon and set up a military wing called the Ambazonia Defence Forces (ADF). (Several other smaller armed groups developed after 2017, many stemming from former self-defence militias, or from fragments of larger secessionist groups.)

Unrest escalated further in September and October 2017, as tens of thousands of demonstrators demanded an end to discrimination against the Anglophone region and called for independence.[38] On 1 October 2017, several Anglophone armed groups announced the independence of the Anglophone region, prompting demonstrations in support of the Anglophone cause and a harsh government response.[39]

Separatist rebellion: 2017–present

As demonstrations grew, and were persistently met with harsh repression by state forces, the popularity of an armed rebellion gained widespread reception in the Anglophone region and among the Anglophone diaspora.[40] A fighter with an armed group described the early days of support as 'heydays' void of 'harmful practices', and a time when there was a 'romantic relationship between the population and the restorationists,' referring to the Anglophone Restoration Forces.[41]

By the end of 2017, demonstrations more than doubled from the previous year, with police using increasing amounts of force and leaving dozens of reported fatalities among demonstrators and civilians suspected to support the Anglophone cause.[42] Meanwhile, self-defence groups became emboldened to try offensive action. They were increasingly picking up weapons – many using hunting rifles[43] – and clashing with military forces, using the forests to ambush better-equipped soldiers.[44] One separatist fighter active in Kom division, Northwest region, said that a combination of 'frustration, unemployment, sheer oppression, exploitation and marginalization in all its forms' were factors behind taking up arms.[45]

Yaoundé's initial response to the escalating violence was the deployment of state forces to suppress armed groups, seemingly from the perspective that a swift and harsh response would stabilize the situation.[46] State forces deployed thousands of troops and increased their military capacity, inflicting numerous losses among separatist fighters.[47] Amid the offensive, state forces often closed off sections of inhabited areas in search of fighters or supporters of Anglophone groups.[48] Levels of civilian targeting rose, with state military forces as the primary perpetrator. In 2016, political violence in the Anglophone region made up less than 1% of the total political violence in Cameroon amid simultaneous insurgent violence in Extreme-North region. By the end of 2018, 70% of overall political violence took place in the Anglophone region despite insurgent violence diminishing only slightly over this period (*see Figure 1*).[49]

The Yaoundé government's political responses – including diplomatic negotiations, regional elections, special status policies towards the Anglophone region and some cultural attempts such as the recruitment of bilingual teachers – largely failed to appease Anglophone demands.[50] The Yaoundé government further attempted to appease Anglophone groups in 2020 by holding the first regional elections in the country's history. This process opened up numerous council positions with decision-making authority on certain local issues.[51] However, the ruling party dominated the elections – gaining nine of the 10 regional seats – while several separatist groups boycotted the process.[52] Leading up to and following the regional elections, the ACLED dataset records numerous events of violence targeting government officials in the Anglophone region, with nearly all the attacks and abductions carried out by separatist groups. Separatist targeting of local officials was especially high by the second quarter of 2021 when the elected candidates filled their new positions.

Political violence in the Anglophone region continued escalating since 2017, with rising civilian targeting by both sides, and the increased use of explosives and remote violence.[53] As discussed in the next section, the elevated violence and increased operations by separatist groups as an independence movement later turned inward, fighting over leadership disputes and resulting in the fragmentation of armed groups.

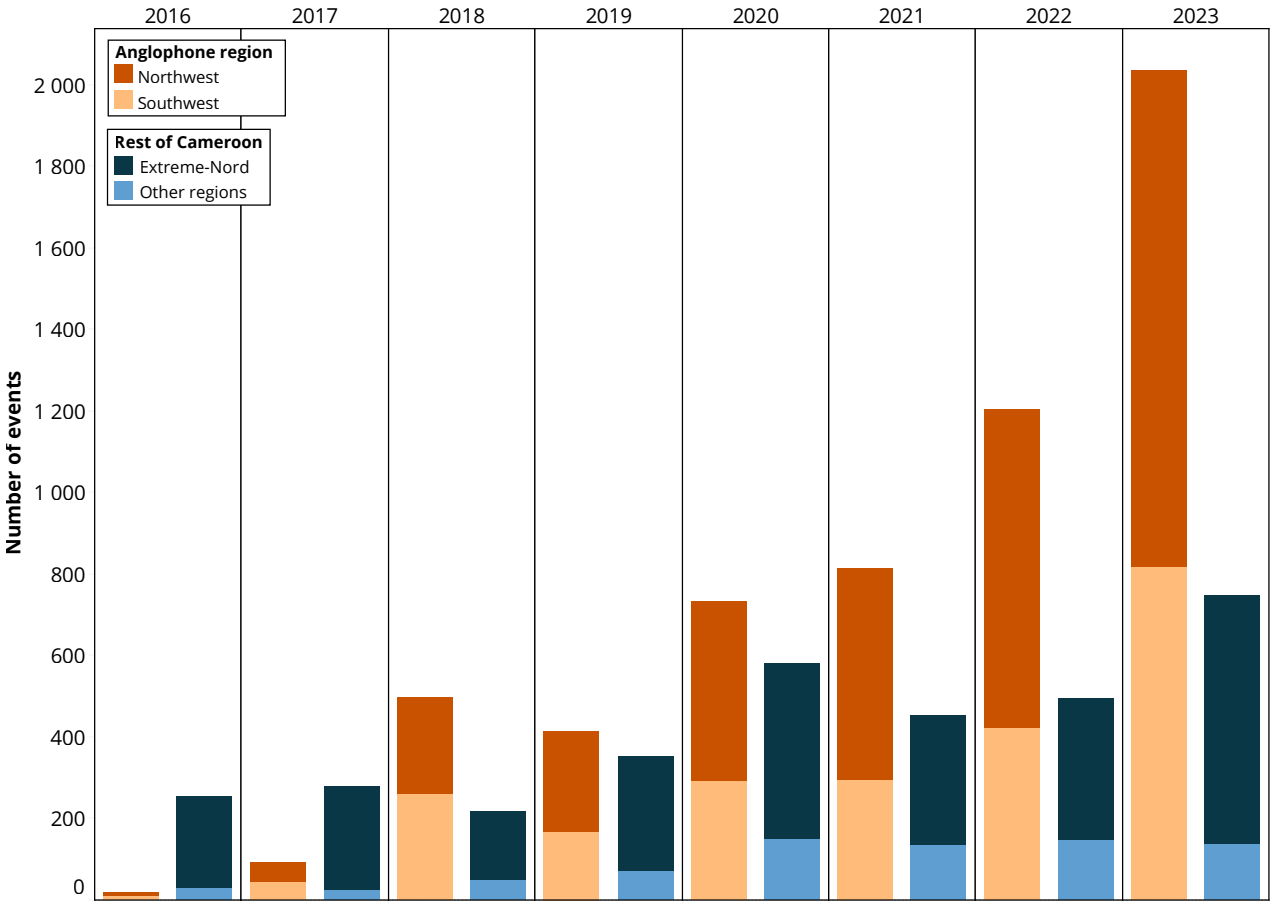
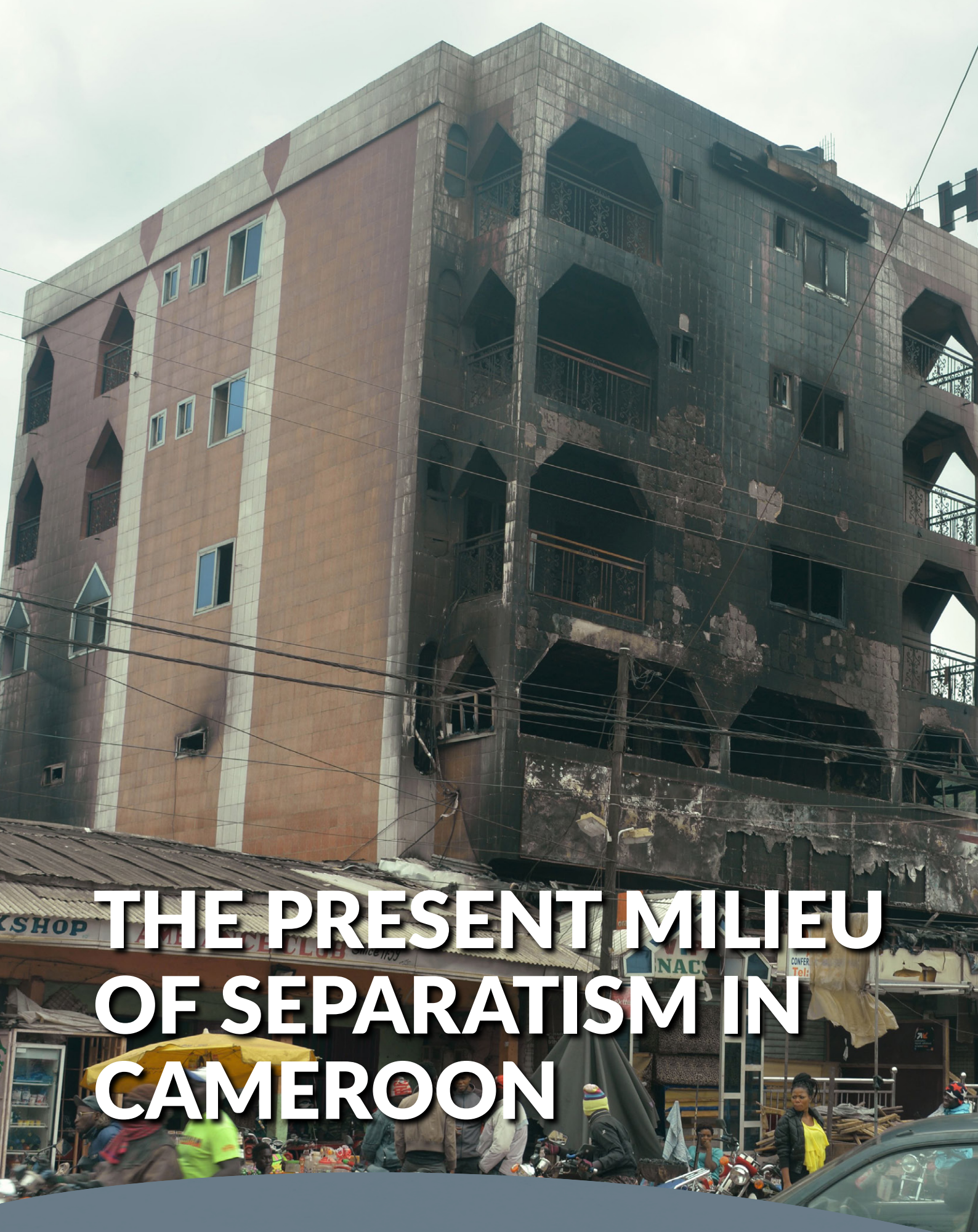


FIGURE 1 **Disorder in Cameroon and the Anglophone region, 2016–2023.**

SOURCE: ACLED data



THE PRESENT MILIEU OF SEPARATISM IN CAMEROON

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Conflict in the Anglophone region grew each year, with violent events rising an average of 49% per year from 2020 to 2023. Unlike the earlier years of conflict between 2017 and 2019, further factionalization and infighting have since marked the separatist movement. An increasing number of separatist armed groups – each with fewer combatants within their ranks – fight among one another. Emerging alongside this is violence by an increasing number of ethnic and communal militias. While growing instability affects the Anglophone region as a whole, Northwest region continues to account for a larger portion of total political violence and comprises at least 60% of annual events since 2020. In 2023, increased civilian targeting, ongoing fighting between separatist groups and state forces, and renewed violence from a separate group of secessionists called the Biafra Nations League from the bordering Bakassi peninsula of Nigeria, led to political violence rising by 55% in Northwest region and 98% in Southwest region compared to the previous year.[54] This section first looks at the increasing fragmentation of the conflict before exploring the tactics and internal structure of Anglophone separatist groups. Finally, this section examines the Anglophone alliances and animosity outside Cameroon.

A conflict marked by fragmentation

Due to the increasing number of armed groups, the internal structure and composition varies from hierarchical command under broader Anglophone governments to more independent, smaller groups with more proximate ambitions. In 2022, infighting rose by 80% from the previous year and rose again in 2023 by 83%.[55] While Anglophone groups share a common aspiration for further political autonomy, economic opportunities, legal provisions and cultural acceptance, the separatist cause has long been marked by disunity (*see Figure 2*).[56] Disputes between the Anglophone leaders, especially between Sisiku Julius Ayuk Tabe – the initial leader of the IG before he was arrested with other top leaders in Nigeria and extradited to Cameroon for a life sentence – and Samuel Ikome Sako – who took over from Tabe as interim president – created splits in the self-proclaimed Anglophone governments.[57] Other leaders, including Emmanuel Nji Tita,[58] Marianta Njomia,[59] Chris Anu[60] also claimed to lead the IG at various times, while former Anglophone youth movement leader, Ayaba Cho Lucas, currently leads the AGC.[61] As separatist groups compete for control of power and regional representation, Anglophone groups have increasingly failed to unite against Yaoundé.[62]

The competition between these groups and their disparate aims have diminished the effectiveness of Anglophone groups – both in making unified political demands and in resisting offensives by state forces. Over the course of the Anglophone conflict, the major Anglophone political groups largely lost control over armed groups, particularly as their funds were depleted. In turn, many armed groups narrowed their focus towards localized power and resourcing.[63] Especially rising in 2020 and 2021, dozens of separatist commanders were killed, arrested, or laid down arms – often leading to leadership struggles over succession.[64] While many of these deaths followed battles with state forces, a growing number of deaths took place at the hands of other separatist groups or from fighters within the ranks of the same group.[65] ACLED records the highest levels of infighting among Anglophone Restoration Forces – an umbrella separatist organization loyal to Samuel Ikome Sako and operating under the IG.[66]

Aside from fragmentation within separatist ranks, the rising number of armed actors poses increasing challenges for resolving the conflict and escalating threat to the civilian population. In 2022, the number of active conflict actors rose by 76% from the previous year, and by 2023 reached the highest level since the start of the Anglophone crisis – with 50 unique armed groups operating in 2023 (*see Figure 3*). Many of these include various Anglophone factions, but rising ethnic and communal tensions also show deepening internal divisions within the region.

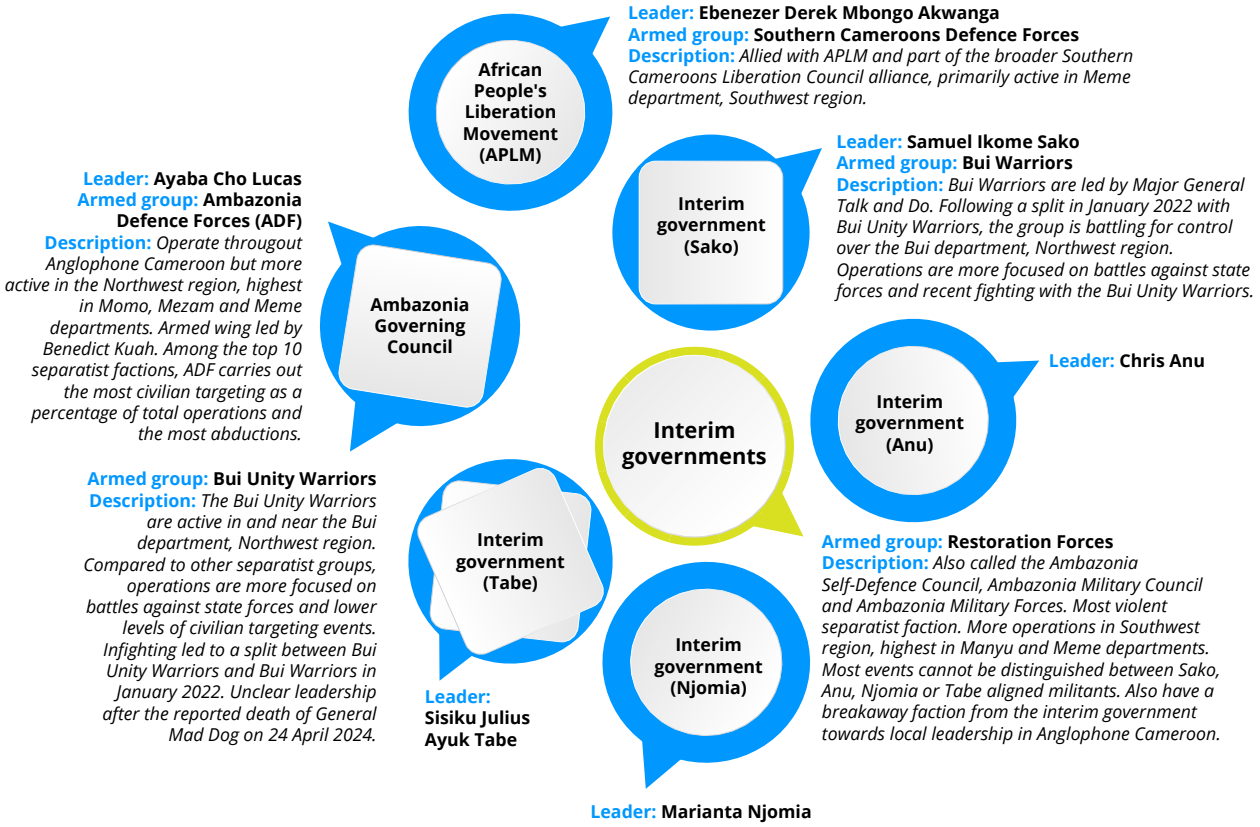


FIGURE 2 Anglophone separatist armed groups and political bodies.

SOURCE: Adapted from Nancy-Wangue Moussissa, Cameroon: Who makes up the Ambazonian government and diaspora?, The Africa Report, September 2022; Maxwell Bone, Ahead of peace talks, a who's who of Cameroon's separatist movements, The New Humanitarian, July 2020; Interim Government, Who we are; Human Rights Watch, 'They are destroying our future', December 2021; Africa News, Some warring parties in Cameroon's Anglophone crisis to enter peace process – Canada, January 2023.

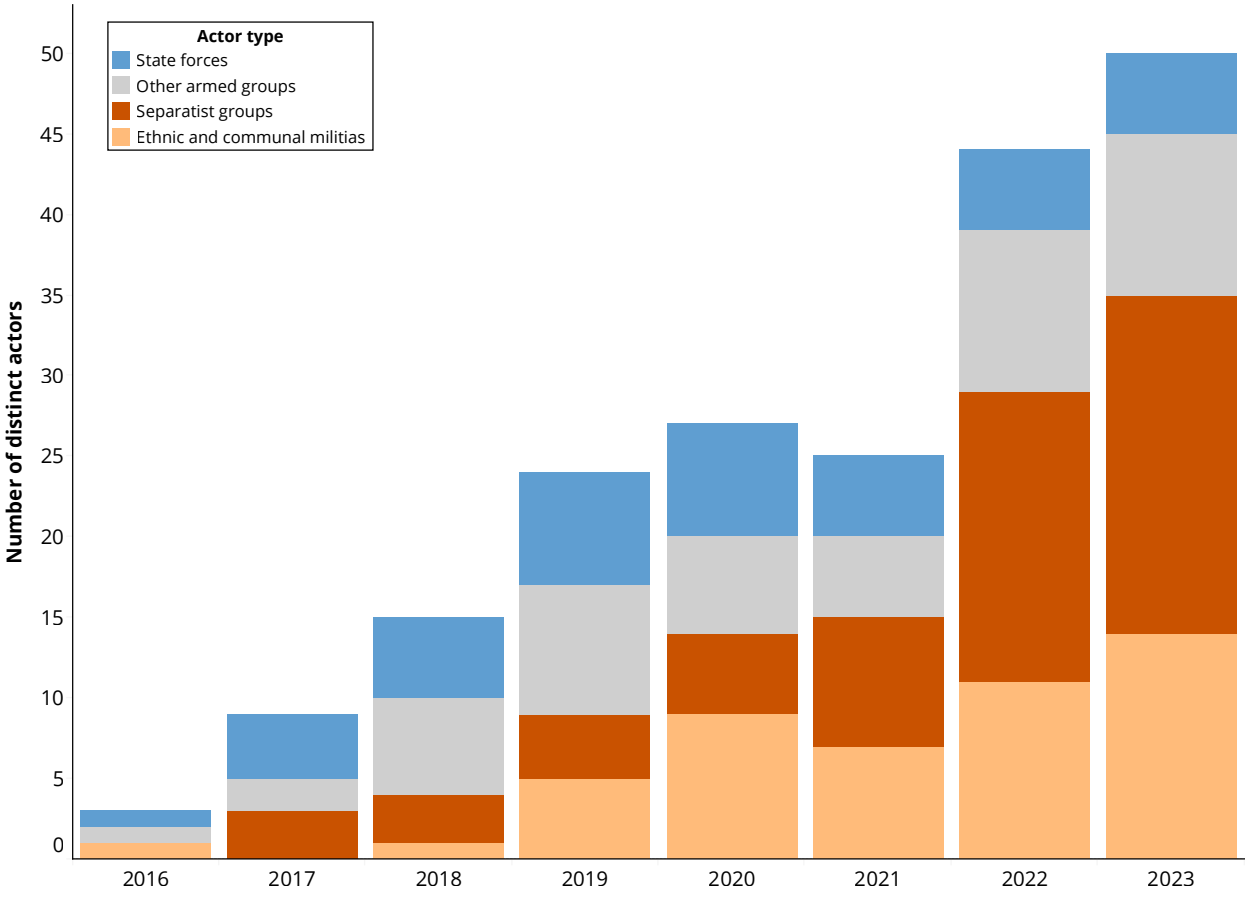


FIGURE 3 Proliferation of armed actors in Anglophone Cameroon, 2016–2023.

SOURCE: ACLED data

Indeed, strong divisions between geographic and ethnic identities limited separatists from unifying the region as a cohesive group under a unified Anglophone identity.[67] Amid the more than 20 ethnic groups within Cameroon, ethnic and communal identity remains a strong organizing principle for many separatist armed groups.[68]

Mirroring a broader trend of growing pro-government militia mobilization across West Africa,[69] military forces increasingly provided economic and material support to pro-Yaoundé militias as a proxy force in the Anglophone region against separatists.[70] These local militias are often composed of Mbororo people, pastoralists from the broader Fulani ethnic group who have been frequent victims of targeted violence by Anglophone fighters.[71] While levels of violence by ethnic and communal militias have been lower than state forces, ethnic and communal violence surged in 2022 from the previous year, rising again in 2023 by 17%.[72]

Tactics

Throughout the conflict, separatist fighters have typically been equipped with weapons inferior to those of the state forces. Before organizing more widespread smuggling of arms into the region from Nigeria in late 2018 and early 2019, many fighters relied on basic hunting rifles.[73] In order to face the more advanced weaponry of the military forces, separatists resorted to insurgent tactics, especially the use of the forested and mountainous geography in the Anglophone region.[74] While maintaining rural camps, fighters have also lived among supporters in populated areas. Diminished local support, however, has limited some separatists' ability to live in areas with disenfranchised populations.[75]

Given the challenges for separatist fighters to gain local legitimacy and base themselves in more populated areas, an increasing amount of violence has shifted towards areas of

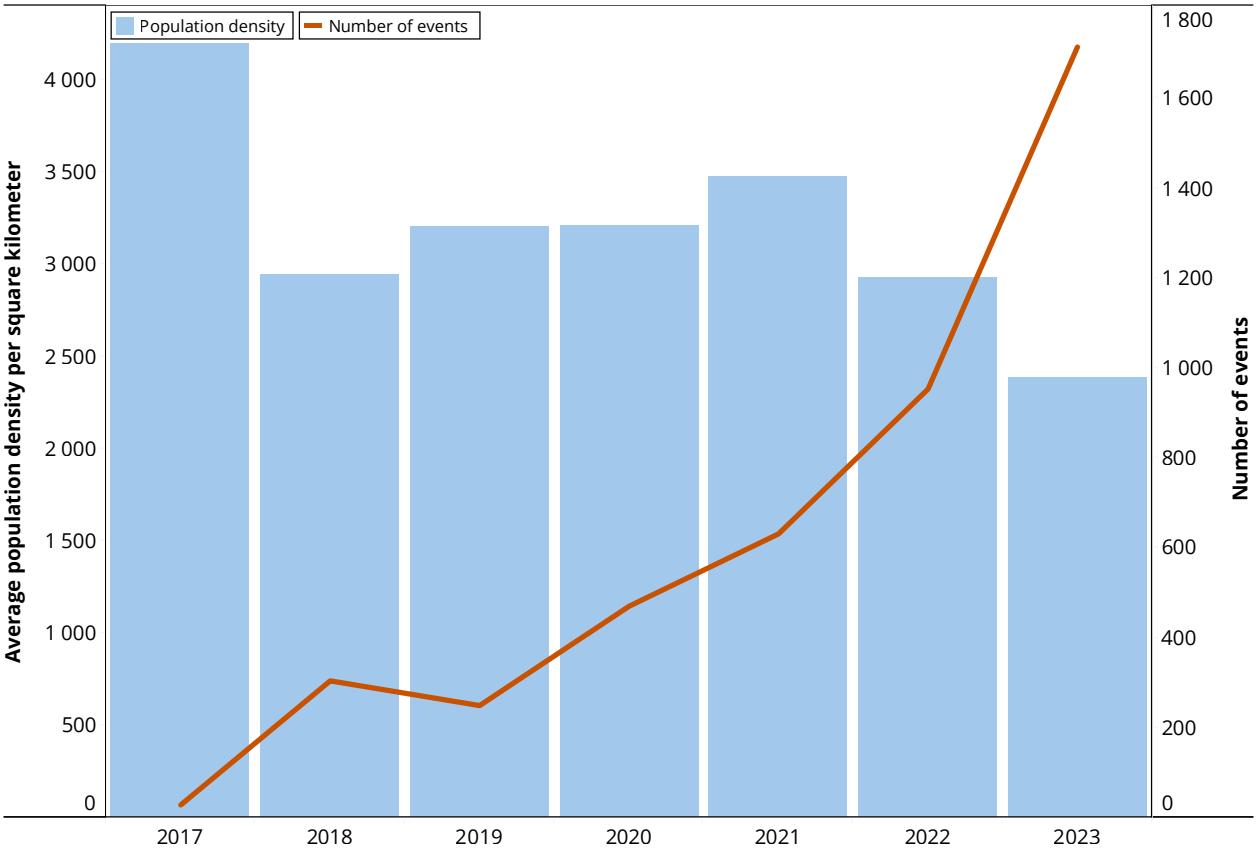


FIGURE 4 Political violence involving separatists in Anglophone Cameroon, 2017–2023.

SOURCE: ACLED data; Population density data taken from Global Human Settlement Layer

lower population density since 2021 (*see Figure 4*). The early unrest in 2017 took place in more populated areas of more than 4 000 people per square kilometre, with demonstrators often turning out in the Anglophone region's more populated towns and cities such as Bamenda and Mamfe. Facing waning support and exposure to state forces, the more mountainous terrain in rural areas, such as around Bui, provides strategic advantages for separatist fighters and makes access difficult for military forces.[76] Since 2021, political violence events involving separatists has waned from areas with an average population density of over 3 000 per square kilometre to less than 2 500 in 2023.[77]

In line with these insurgent tactics, armed separatists have made extensive use of IEDs, carrying out nearly all the explosive and remote violence in the Anglophone region.[78] Following increased military operations since mid 2020, separatists began using a growing number of IEDs – with nearly 60 of these events recorded in 2023. The use of remote violence by separatists mostly targeted the military and police, but also struck civilians on dozens of occasions.[79]

Internal group structure and composition of separatist groups

Due to the number of groups, the size, structure, leadership and composition of each Anglophone group varies dramatically. Among the armed groups operating in the Anglophone region, clear ideological differences divide groups between demands for a separate state and further federalism – with others more focused on controlling increasingly localized areas.[80] Primary forms of Anglophone rebel groups include smaller, former self-defence militias – frequently referred to as 'Amba boys.'

Two of the larger Anglophone separatist groups – IG and AGC – coordinate competing armed groups. The IG coordinates the ASDC armed wing, composed of numerous local armed groups often called Restoration Forces. Although initially the largest separatist group, the leadership challenges in the IG and ASDC led many of the Restoration Forces to break off. Like the IG, the AGC formed the Ambazonia Defence Forces as a militant wing. The larger armed groups, including the ADF and ASDC, have a hierarchical organizational structure with diaspora leaders providing commands to generals on the ground (*see Figure 5*). The generals, in turn, oversee and issue orders to multiple sub-generals, or mission commanders, who direct specific units.[81] One separatist fighter in Awing – a town in Northwest region near Bamenda – explained the hierarchical organization of some groups based on the ranks of generals. Generals control numerous camps, mission commanders and soldiers, depending on the levels of violent experience of a particular militant. Specifically, he said:

> A general controls many camps. To rise to that rank depends on what you have done significantly. For example, either one has killed a soldier and taken his gun, or has taken [a soldier's] gun and arrest[ed] him. Secondly, as a mission commander, if one successfully completes a mission without any member of the battalion captured or killed, he is upgraded.[82]

Other militants mentioned the use of multiple militant camp locations.[83] Some note, however, that some fighters operate more independently without a clear command structure.[84]

For the IG, the administration uses units called local government areas (LGAs) to manage its activities on the ground, with a diaspora-run 'LGA Executive Branch.' The LGA Executive Branch aims to lend administrative support to the armed units on the ground, with particular people in the Executive Branch responsible for supporting their corresponding LGA. In this way, there is also a local separatist militia that operates in the same area as a local authority.[85] LGAs are more broadly administered by county administrations, but most of the leadership is based abroad.

Although coordination takes place between separatists, through connections to specific locations and ethnic groups, internal divisions and leadership disputes within the IG and AGC led to numerous splits. As a result, the armed groups often operate independently of the broader leadership. The divisions between Anglophone militants occasionally give rise to clashes against one another. Separatists tend to justify these battles by accusing another group of providing poor governance, lack of security and mistreating the civilian population. One statement by the IG even called the ADF one of 'two principal enemies among their lists of enemies' alongside the Yaoundé government.[86] Internal disputes give rise to violence and executions of commanders and generals.[87] In some areas, such as Lebialem – a department of Southwest region – multiple groups compete for control to be the sole armed separatist group.[88] Dozens of separatist armed group leaders have been killed since the beginning of the conflict, with numerous others likely killed during infighting which tends to go unreported.[89]

Below the generals and commanders, separatist units tend to be comprised of less than 30 fighters. Larger groups are less common and consist of more than a hundred fighters, such as the ADF.[90] Some socio-political groups form a sizeable part of the recruits, including women and motorcycle taxi drivers who have been the target of strategic recruitment drives. Women joined the struggle within separatist groups as fighters, political activists and supporters – forming approximately 10% of the total number of separatist fighters.[91] One male fighter shared that girls occupy strategic positions within the camps, stating that 'the girls play the role of the police and vigilantes – they are like secret agents.'[92] Women have also been a strategic part of recruiting or encouraging others to join the Anglophone cause, viewing the state forces as an enemy who have carried out violence against civilians in the Anglophone region.[93]

Motorcycle taxi drivers (called *okada*) also form an important part of the separatist movement as fighters and sympathizers, also facing harsh crackdowns by state forces. Motorcycles are used extensively to facilitate the extremely mobile tactics of Anglophone groups, shuttling arms and personnel for insurgent operations, to avoid military force checkpoints and restrictions.[94] *Okada* would ride in convoy on the streets to show support for the Anglophone cause and enforce ghost town measures.[95] Some key separatist leaders worked previously as *okada* drivers – such as General No Pity.[96] Yet, *okada* drivers who fail to support separatists have been targeted as suspected spies for state forces.[97]

Transnational links, alliances and enmities

Many Anglophone separatist groups maintain deep international connections, specifically through Anglophone Cameroonians in the diaspora. The diaspora role was especially important in the early years of the conflict, with diaspora activists styling themselves as both governors and military organizers from afar – particularly after the arrest of the separatist political leadership in Nigeria in January 2018.[98] Diaspora leaders' influence and control over armed group operations diminished over time, losing credibility among outside supporters. Nevertheless, the overarching structures that nominally represent and control Anglophone armed groups are inherently designed to ensure diaspora involvement in a leadership capacity.

The diaspora leadership arose as many who fled during the escalating unrest in 2017 were already well-known youth organizers and activists. From their new homes in the US, United Kingdom, Nigeria, or elsewhere in Europe and Africa, these Anglophone youth leaders leveraged large social media followings and began to advocate for more radical action.[99] A journalist who has closely covered the conflict described the connections between the small, village-level, self-defence units with diaspora figures and the broader separatist cause as follows:

> It was generally groups that started forming and aligning towards diaspora leaders. It was difficult for whole villages to organize themselves and say, 'let's come together to form armed groups.' There were some groups, young boys in some villages, who would just go and set up small groups – I don't know how. They were reaching out to diaspora leaders and telling them, 'okay, we've created these groups to protect the villages and protect our land. And we would also want to have some sort of collaboration with you.' At that point, young boys, and even young girls, were probably using stones, sticks and cutlasses. They were not weapons like later on. But they started attacking soldiers and then taking weapons from the soldiers to arm themselves...
>
> At the time when the groups were being formed, you would see some of the diaspora leaders who published videos [on social media] of the guys on the ground. And they are saying [in the video] 'we are here, we just formed this group, and this is the village where we find ourselves. We don't have shoes. We don't have this. We don't have that. We are pledging allegiance to this person.' And there's always a way for the diaspora leaders to reach out to them, provide these things and then start controlling them. These groups came up on their own and simply pledged allegiance to Ayaba Cho and other leaders who are in the diaspora.[100]

These connections and structures linking the diaspora with armed groups granted extensive leadership roles for activists abroad (*see Figure 5*). For example, the IG's command structure allows diaspora activists a core role in organizing its affiliated armed groups' activities.[101] The authority accorded to diaspora figures was not just a product of inspiration or loyalty, but transactional. Diaspora leaders traded leadership for supplying groups on the ground with money, weapons, or information – particularly around military movements. This support from the diaspora thus helped to provide the three most important resources for the separatist fight.

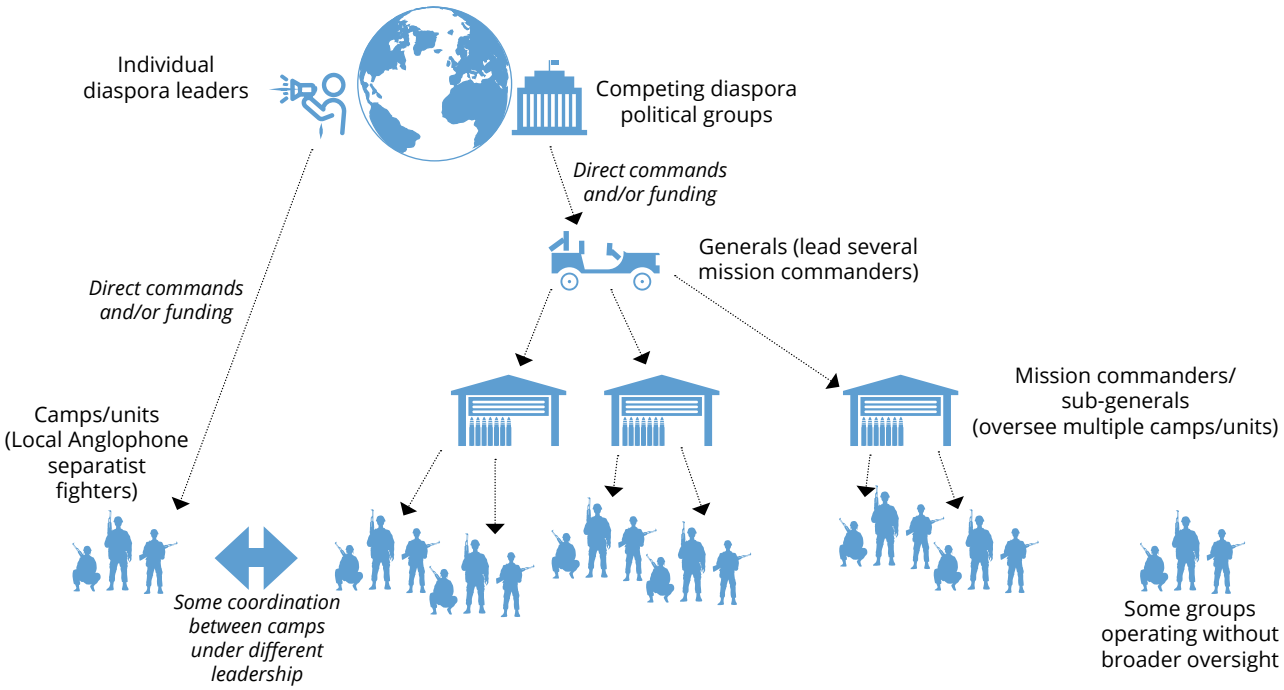


FIGURE 5 Diaspora political groups and leaders in Cameroon.

SOURCE: ACLED

Both diaspora activists and armed groups on the ground were able to obtain a great deal of information on military movements, allegedly – on occasion – directly from soldiers themselves, in exchange for bribes or other favours.[102] However, the diaspora also helped the separatists to obtain arms more directly.

An academic and activist from Bamenda recounted the below from the early days of the conflict:

> [A diaspora activist] who was in Belgium, mobilized a small group of SCNC to smuggle in guns from Nigeria. He was famous in Europe online and found many people willing to help. He flew to Nigeria, crossed the border into Cameroon and started posting photos of himself with guns in Cameroon. It's very easy to cross that border: you just walk. But they weren't only sending guns, they were sending money to the different village groups.[103]

Diaspora figures initially gained leadership roles due to their perceived ability to fundraise abroad for armed groups on the ground. Yet this role has been increasingly filled by the armed groups themselves, by other means. Illicit economic activity has become a critical component of continued financing, as illicit activities by separatist fighters led to ruptures between the diaspora activists, the armed groups and the wider Anglophone Cameroonian population. Along with the increasing civilian targeting, separatists' use of kidnap for ransom diminished the popularity of the armed groups among supporters of independence abroad.

Diaspora leaders helped and encouraged the initial small-scale and poorly organized groups to use more advanced methods and expand their ideological horizons. By virtue of their online presence, diaspora leaders inspired followings and played roles in coordinating disparate groups who had not previously interacted.

FINANCING AND RESOURCING

Financing and resourcing tend to be a critical influence in armed actors' structural evolution, given that most decision-making depends on the means at a group's disposal. In the separatists' case, some separatist groups began dabbling in kidnap for ransom in 2018 – albeit at lower levels. Abductions (a majority of which were for ransom later) rose in subsequent years, becoming an issue that crippled support from the diaspora. Likewise, diaspora activists and leaders lost the trust of many former supporters over suspicions of financial mismanagement. The resulting drop in revenue led to an increased reliance by armed groups on illicit activity, including kidnap for ransom. Ultimately, this negative feedback loop splintered the Anglophone movement as grassroots fighters became less credible vectors for the separatist cause. This section examines how Anglophone armed groups obtain the finances and goods necessary for their operations. Further, the section considers the motivations of separatists and the impact of these financial factors on the groups' organization.

Financing from diaspora activists to armed groups

Financing separatist fighters from the diaspora[104] required a string of intermediaries, often using mobile money transfers, foreign currency exchange and cryptocurrencies. While diaspora activists and donors can make direct transfers to local separatist groups, broader organizational bodies (the IG and the AGC), foreign intermediaries and local armed groups themselves facilitate transfers as well. The Yaoundé government has cracked down on some of these financial flows and imprisoned some involved.[105] In light of increasing restrictions from Yaoundé and declining support from abroad, diaspora funding has declined over time, although has not been completely stopped.[106]

Many of the transfers made by the diaspora do not appear to pass through the major organizing bodies of the separatist movement, but rather go from a diaspora activist to their affiliated armed group. While the major organizing bodies of the separatist movement (i.e. the AGC and the IG) have taken on a fundraising role, it is not clear whether this was, or whether it remains the majority source of diaspora funds for Anglophone armed groups. Personal connections between diaspora activists and particular armed groups, as well as local factors such as enthusiasm for the Anglophone cause, substantially influence this international financing.[107] Some villages may then choose to share their diaspora funds with other groups in need.[108]

The funds have been transferred in various ways, although transfer mechanisms have varied over time. Initially, mobile money transfers were most common, with providers such as Western Union, MTN Mobile Money, Orange Money and MoneyGram all allegedly used.[109] However, in 2019, the Cameroonian government began monitoring the transfers more closely and arresting those who went to collect them. As a representative for the Agence Nationale d'Invéstigation Financière (ANIF), the Cameroonian national financial crime agency explained, the government realized that separatist armed groups tended to collect their transfers in the early morning or late evening, and security forces began monitoring pickups at these times, which led to numerous arrests.[110]

As a result, several other types of transfer came into play. When transfers are made, these often assume a form similar to a hawala system, sometimes with the additional use of different currencies or the use of businesses as intermediaries.[111] For instance, a diaspora activist will give a large sum of cash – in the currency of their home country – to a Cameroonian resident or business, who will then forward an equivalent sum in Central African (CFA) franc to an Anglophone group or a representative. The various intermediaries and foreign currency exchange make the system difficult to trace.[112]

Previous iterations of diaspora financial support involved bank transfers. The use of direct bank transfers allowed the Yaoundé government to follow the funding and resulted in serious consequences for some of the individuals involved. In one case, the Yaoundé government reportedly examined the bank account of an individual and found a diaspora transfer, which led to their prosecution and imprisonment in the Douala New Bell prison.[113]

Given the proximity of the Anglophone provinces to Nigeria, another common approach involves using a Nigerian agent to transfer funds to separatist armed groups. A diaspora leader might, for instance, persuade a Nigerian business to transfer a sum of money from their business to an Anglophone-affiliated business in Cameroon. The Cameroonian business would then withdraw the money for an armed group representative to come and pick it up. Alternatively, goods may be purchased from Nigerian sources and transferred over the border. A lecturer formerly based at the University of Bamenda also described direct purchases of Nigerian arms by the diaspora:

> There are also agents in Nigeria to whom money is sent to use and acquire arms in the black market. The amount of money they receive from the diaspora could range from 500 000 CFA francs to 20 000 000 CFA francs for the acquisition of arms.[114]

A sensationalized but less common approach involves cryptocurrency transfers. In 2018, the self-proclaimed Federal Republic of Ambazonia created 'AmbaCoin' cryptocurrency to raise money for the movement.[115] However, demand for the coin proved low and generated an insignificant source of funds. According to an ANIF agent, the diaspora still uses more mainstream cryptocurrencies, either to make transfers to Anglophone armed groups or to purchase arms or other necessary commodities.[116] In 2022, kidnappers demanded a Catholic priest's ransom in bitcoin since other means of payment, particularly mobile money, were no longer safe to use.[117]

While many countries struggle to regulate cryptocurrency transfers, some businesses in Anglophone Cameroon may help to make cryptocurrency trading more accessible. Booths branded with the Binance cryptocurrency exchange logo operate in Yaoundé and Douala. These booths facilitate cryptocurrency payments and exchange or withdraw cryptocurrency into local currency. According to ANIF, such booths have existed in Douala since 2019. While new regulatory laws by the Yaoundé government created legal restrictions, ANIF says they are not yet enforced, and booths continue operations in contravention of the law.[118]

Several factors led to a drop in diaspora funding since around 2019. As mentioned above, the Cameroonian government clamped down on such money transfers, making these more difficult. Secondly, as explored in more detail in the next section, another reason includes the loss of support for many factions of the armed groups among the Anglophone Cameroonian population.[119] Finally, the Anglophone diaspora lost trust in some well-known separatist leaders, over incidents of suspected embezzlement, as well as obfuscation about the purpose of the funds. Reportedly, many of the donors who had given money to activists fundraising for the separatist cause had been led to believe they were funding humanitarian, not militant efforts.

One journalist covering the conflict noted:

> People came to realize that the money they were giving – to help IDPs, send children to school, help refugees – were now being used to buy arms, to fund groups on the ground. We also heard reports of how Sako changed his suits, he had bodyguards, he was living in a hotel, he had bigger houses. People could see how much was contributed and the money has never been accounted for.
>
> For more than 80% of those who then gave money, if you tell them to do it now, they will say no. Why are they not contributing today? Back then they were contributing money for their people. They were not contributing their money to fund the war. If they were contributing to fund the war, they should be doing that more right now, now that the boys on the ground are heavily armed.[120]

While many in the diaspora sent funds hoping to finance humanitarian efforts, clearly, many donations were also made explicitly to support the armed struggle against the Yaoundé government. Fundraising campaigns frequently used images of separatist fighters since the early years of the conflict. For example, the ABC Amba TV station broadcasts of the conflict positively impacted fundraising from supporters abroad.[121] This suggests that many donors were aware and receptive to their funds being used for militancy from the early days of the conflict, even if others were misled about the purpose of their donations. Nevertheless, a decline in the credibility of the diaspora leaders was an important factor in the decline of diaspora donations. However, this decline was also linked to a decline in the credibility of the armed groups themselves, particularly in regard to their treatment of civilians.

Financing via taxation, extortion and kidnap for ransom

Facing diminished diaspora financial support, separatists turned to an increasing number of abductions for ransom, and to looting, to fund their groups. Anglophone targeting of civilians began in 2017 but comprised only a few events, with more than 89% of civilian targeting in the Anglophone regions carried out by state forces in 2017.[122] Yet, separatists increasingly targeted civilians each year, making up nearly 48% of all political violence by 2020 in Anglophone Cameroon. This elevation in civilian targeting, including a steep rise in abductions and kidnapping for ransom in 2022 and 2023 (*see Figure 6*), further compounded the waning support from both the diaspora and local civilians.

Of the various forms of local revenue generation, separatists increasingly relied upon kidnapping for ransom. Once the kidnappings by separatist groups began in 2018 and 2019, the violence spurred a self-reinforcing cycle. Diaspora groups became increasingly reluctant to send armed groups money, which in turn made them more reliant on kidnapping and other exploitative behaviour. In the words of an academic and activist from Bamenda:

> The relationship between the diaspora and the boys has changed, and that was because of the start of kidnapping and ransom. [From] 2017 to 2019, the diaspora was saying 'These are our boys!' But that stopped after the kidnap started, because some groups were naturally less committed to the war and wanted to make money. The diaspora was unable to tell who was responsible, and they couldn't support people they weren't sure of... So the boys now demand contributions and have found other ways to survive without that finance.[123]

This foray into kidnapping and other forms of civilian targeting played a significant role in the fragmentation of the Anglophone separatist movement, along with broader political developments. Although effective from a fundraising perspective, the abductions diminished support from local populations and many diaspora supporters. Nevertheless, some diaspora leaders did not completely disavow kidnapping, sometimes viewed as a necessary means of punishing those insufficiently supportive of the struggle. Indeed,

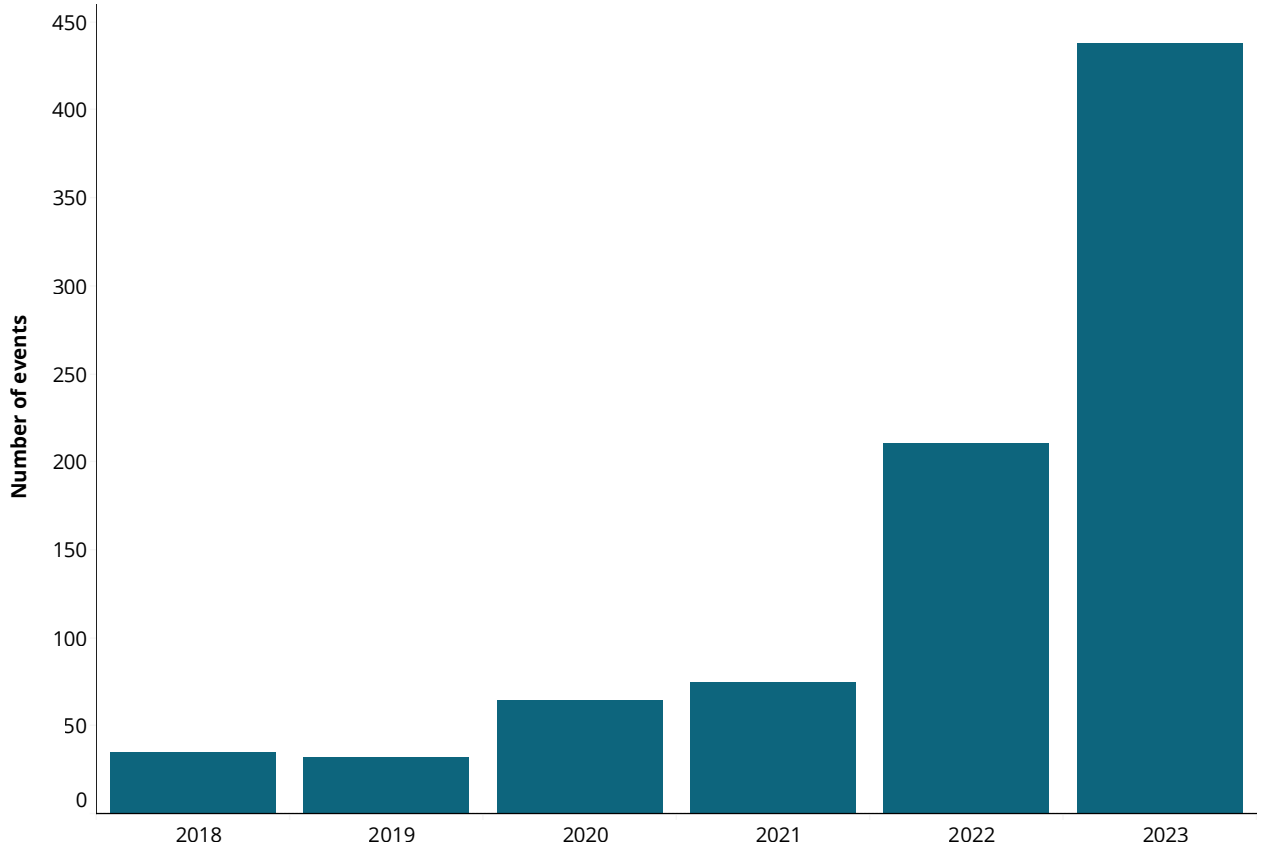


FIGURE 6 Kidnappings and abductions by separatists in Anglophone Cameroon, 2018–2023.

SOURCE: ACLED data

some activists encouraged or endorsed the kidnap of locals suspectedly against separatism, suggesting that the money raised from kidnapping could be used to help more deserving pro-separatism citizens.[124]

Many of those kidnapped by Anglophone separatist groups are politically influential, wealthy, or both. Separatists also kidnap ordinary people, but the profile and personal wealth of an individual determines the cost of the ransom, as well as their vulnerability to kidnap.[125] For instance, police officers and army officers – clearly perceived to be aligned with the state – are frequently kidnapped and ransoms are demanded from their families.[126] While the sums netted per victim are usually not particularly high, the ease and frequency of kidnap as a practice for the Anglophones makes it lucrative. This is not to say kidnappers do not ask for large sums. A sum of US$100 000 was demanded for the release of nine worshippers kidnapped in a Catholic church in Nchang in 2022, (although the community refused to pay, which prompted the kidnappers to drop their demand to US$50 000 instead – a sum that was also refused).[127] Other state representatives' ransoms have been set much lower – for instance, a politician kidnapped in Batibo in April 2023 was allegedly released after a payment of 1 million CFA francs (around US$1 600).[128] Similarly, the mayor of Babessi, Northwest region, was released after the payment of CFA1 million (around US$1 600), according to Human Rights Watch.[129]

In addition to kidnapping, separatists also use extensive 'taxation' on goods and activities. Distinguishing between self-described 'tax' and 'voluntary contributions' by armed group members is difficult because civilians can expect to be punished for non-payment either way – either directly, or through accusations of being against the separatist cause. The below description from a separatist fighter illustrates the rather ad hoc way that payments can be demanded, through a variety of means:

> Sometimes we mount roadblocks and drivers have to pay as they go in and out. This to us means they identify with the cause. Those living out of the village that come for ceremonies – for example, funerals or weddings – they give money. Trucks exporting food crops from the village, like Irish potatoes or coffee beans, must pay a levy. This money we use first for our upkeep, for example to buy bathing supplies, toiletries. We share some of these funds to go to town and relax. Importantly, we use the money to pay for the fabrication of local guns and bullets. And we buy motorbikes for our movements and fuel.[130]

The fighter's admission that receiving 'tax' from civilians is how civilians prove their identification with the cause also reveals the source of much frustration and fear. Fear of government collaborators means that people suspected of insufficiently supporting the cause can find themselves at risk of violence and intimidation. 'Black leg' is a common refrain for a perceived traitor, and accusations that a person is a 'black leg' have been known to provoke violent skirmishes and further reprisals.[131] Understandably, this limits the extent to which civilians are willing to resist demands for taxation, but such demands can simultaneously generate resentment.

As the above fighter describes, separatists often generate revenue using roadblocks. In some cases, separatists call contributions 'voluntary' when the payer chooses how much to give. The demands made at checkpoints or during an incursion into villages tend to invoke the 'war effort' and the need for civilian support.[132] While often using the framing of 'taxation' (the implication being that civilians are receiving something in return), cases where separatist armed groups are threatening violence, looting and extorting residents blurs the lines between taxation and theft.

Despite the frequency of demanding money at roadblocks, separatists did not appear to standardize the amount charged for these 'taxes.' Some evidence suggests that the ADF and the AGC made some attempts to homogenize the sums to be taxed, but this regulation did not appear to spread beyond small geographic areas.[133] Other fighters demanded different fees depending on the size of the vehicle. In one example on 10 May 2023, separatist fighters extorted money from the drivers and passengers of commercial vehicles in Mem, Northwest region – demanding 1 000 CFA francs from smaller vehicles and 5 000 CFA francs from larger ones. They fired warning shots and threatened certain drivers who indicated their resistance to paying.[134] The varied tax amounts charged speak to the broader trend of fragmentation of separatist groups and lack of coordination.

In return for paying the armed groups, fighters also claim to supply the payer with 'protection services.' In one instance, separatists required a family to pay 600 000 CFA francs in tax to the armed group for permission to organize a funeral. The separatists justified the costs as payment for organizing the security of the funeral, including for communication with neighbouring armed groups to ensure attendants could travel freely.[135]

Although this could be construed by separatists as order making on behalf of civilians, bribes can be paid for civilians to grant themselves an exception to armed groups' rules. For example, separatists control the selling and consumption of beverages, including alcohol, in some areas. Anglophone

armed groups often ban products made or distributed by the Les Brasseries du Cameroun company, which is perceived as Francophone and affiliated to the Yaoundé government. Instead, Anglophone fighters permitted the consumption of drinks brought in from Nigeria. However, for a fee euphemistically referred to as a 'licence,' drinks sellers may sell Brasseries du Cameroun beverages.[136] Thus, while separatist armed groups do regulate certain sectors of the economy, these fees and bribes allowed some civilians additional room to manoeuvre.

Resourcing and illicit economies

Beyond the shift towards more local financing by Anglophone separatists, these armed groups also resource themselves through integration into illicit trade – to enrich themselves and obtain necessary weapons, fuel and other goods required for their operations. Accessing weapons and various commodities exposed numerous connections to Nigeria, as well as the local supply chains in the Anglophone region.

Weapons

The majority of weapons purchased by Anglophone separatist groups were smuggled over the border with Nigeria into Cameroon. The smuggled arms tend to be Kalashnikov-style rifles, although some separatists allegedly purchased other types of machine guns and rocket-propelled grenade launchers (RPGs). However, separatists rarely use RPGs during operations, with fewer than 10 reported cases of RPG use in the separatist conflict since 2017.[137] According to a businessman working in the Bamenda-Mamfe-Ikome corridor, separatists obtain the majority of arms from the Niger Delta and Akwa Ibom states from unidentified suppliers.[138] Some sources pointed to Nigerian armed groups, including the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), as the likely suppliers for such arms, but no further evidence for this assertion was found during the course of this research.[139]

The smuggling of arms relied upon concealing the weapons within the numerous transfers of goods going over the

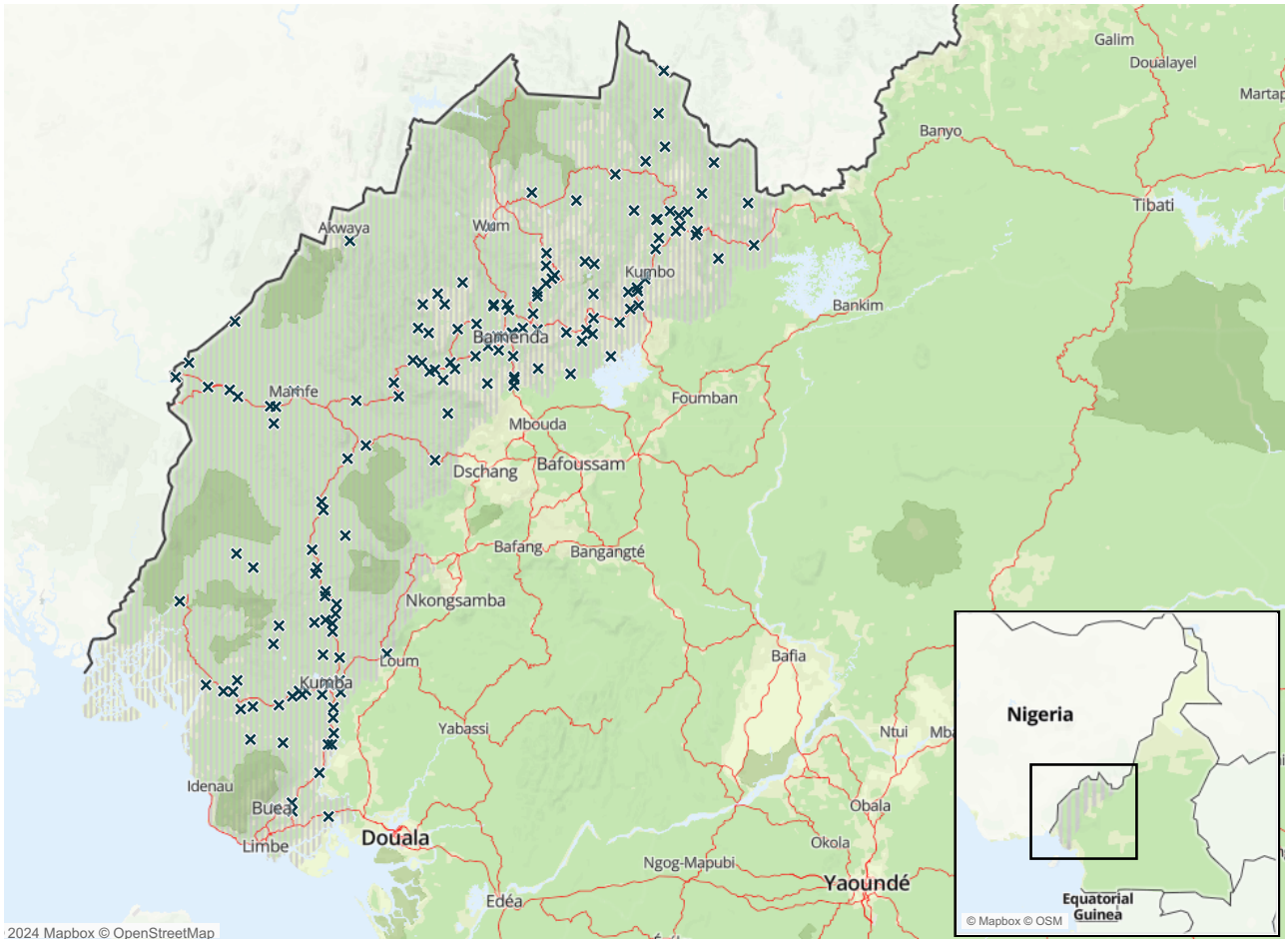


FIGURE 7 Separatist-erected checkpoints in Anglophone Cameroon, 2017–2023.

SOURCE: ACLED data

Weapons seized from separatist fighters in Bamenda, Northwest Cameroon, February 2019.
© E. Kindzeka/VOA

Nigerian border into Cameroon. As an academic researcher from Bamenda described: 'In the Northwest, people usually go to Nigeria to buy TVs or things like that. So there's a lot of business back and forth across the border. Businessmen would load trucks with weapons but hide them under other commodities.'[140]

Large trucks reportedly carry some weapons, but individuals on motorbikes also transport arms in small numbers. A police officer who had formerly worked in Kumbo recounted: 'I can remember vividly in one operation in Kumbo. We intercepted a bike rider with a speaker box coming in from Nigeria. In the box there was no speaker inside but guns that had been dismantled to be assembled in their place of operation.'[141]

Beyond smuggling from Nigeria, separatists draw on two other important sources of small arms. The first includes the local production of artisanal weapons or the circulation of so-called 'legacy weapons.' These tend to be aged hunting rifles that local blacksmiths adapt for combat purposes.[142] Information on the production and distribution of artisanal or legacy weapons in the Northwest and Southwest remained limited, but seizures by state forces suggest that illicit factories produce the weapons that dealers then illegally trade on an ad-hoc basis. For instance, a 2022 army raid on an artisanal arms production site in Buea led to the arrest of 20 people and the seizure of '…six hunting guns, three artisanal pistols, 40 cannons, pistol ammunition, a bag of tramadol and a packet of Indian hemp.'[143]

In addition to the artisanal and legacy weapons, separatists have also allegedly accessed military grade arms and ammunition from elements of the security forces. Some weapons allegedly came from Cameroonian soldiers, offering separatists their weapons in exchange for their help leaving the country, or for a fee.[144] Anglophone fighters also allegedly coerced captured soldiers into giving them their weapons or forcing soldiers to gain access to additional arms.[145] This means of sourcing small arms is not unusual in western and central Africa – artisanal arms manufacture is widespread in Cameroon and in neighbouring nations such as the Central African Republic, Chad and Nigeria, and official military stocks are looted or stolen in the wake of attacks, and then resold on illicit markets.[146]

Fuel and other commodities

Given the separatists' reliance on motorbikes for their operations and mobility, Anglophone groups must maintain fuel supplies. Anglophone armed groups often use fuel brought from Nigeria, an illicit practice pre-dating the separatist conflict. Smuggling in border regions – at least of more mundane commodities than arms – is perceived as a harmless way to make a living and indeed one of the few ways that residents in this area can make a substantial income.[147]

Throughout much of West Africa, 'criminal' behaviour is typically perceived to include violence against communities, such as robbery, kidnapping or other acts that negatively impact ordinary people. In contrast, many perceive smuggling as amoral, neutral or a legitimate way to make a living in otherwise difficult circumstances.[148]

This trade in illicit fuel, locally known as *fungue*, originated in the 1990s and 2000s, but reportedly rapidly expanded in the wake of the construction of the highways between Ikom in Nigeria's Cross Rivers state and Bamenda in 2014, as well as better developed roads between Kumba and Mamfe.[149] *Fungue* smuggling comprises a significant part of the local economy, according to a trader in illicit fuel working in the corridor between Ikom and Bamenda. In his words:

> Honestly it has changed the economic and livelihood situation of so many families that I know personally. There are thousands of people in Bamenda and in other towns of the Northwest region as well as in the Southwest, West region and Littoral regions involved in the business.[150]

Separatists rely on smuggled fuel, partly due to illicit sources being less dangerous but also because of the greater availability of *fungue* than licit fuel in the remote villages where many of the armed groups operate.[151] Separatists use smuggled *fungue* for the vast majority of their fuel needs, and as a source of revenue by taxing or extorting *fungue* traders.[152] While much of this happens on roadways, one case on 13 July 2023 showed how separatist fighters also patrol waterways when Anglophone fighters seized *fungue* from a boat taking fuel along the Manyu River in Beteme, Southwest region.[153]

Anglophone separatist armed groups' approaches to both financing and resourcing are opportunistic, ad-hoc and deeply embedded in the long-standing illicit economies that have developed on the Cameroon-Nigeria border. It is noteworthy that, according to residents of Northwest region, the removal of Nigerian fuel subsidies in May 2023 did not affect the prices of *fungue*.[154] Some reported that smuggled fuel passing into Cameroon illicitly comes from militias in south-eastern Nigeria. Since the fuel does not pass through Nigerian state channels at any point, the price in Cameroon remained largely unchanged at the time of writing. Northwest region in Cameroon has few, if any, operational filling stations under statutory recognition by Yaoundé.[155] As a result, smuggled fuel is the only source available.

GOVERNANCE

'Governance' in this series of reports refers to armed groups' attempts to establish themselves as authorities in their local areas – through the regulation of residents' behaviour, service provision, and the control of local finances and economies, including illicit economies.[156] As it refers to non-state armed groups, it is important to understand that 'governance' does not refer simply to service provision, nor does it imply the local legitimacy of their rule. Indeed, governance – insofar as it refers to maintaining local control and ordering civilian behaviour – can be coercive, even if the group in question also provides some services.[157]

Anglophone separatists' efforts to build legitimacy with civilians and behave like a service-providing authority shifted over time, with more ambitious actions in the early years of the conflict dwindling, to now relying increasingly on coercion and the use of force.[158] As practiced by other armed groups in West Africa, Anglophone separatists initially aimed to bolster legitimacy through the provision of public goods and services.[159] Other separatist groups, such as the Eastern Security Network – the armed wing of IPOB in Nigeria – often collect taxes, engage in security services, regulate economic activities, and provide justice for civilians while simultaneously destroying infrastructure and fighting government forces as a tactic to limit the state's reach.[160] Anglophone separatist coordination between groups and with the diaspora initially provided sufficient financial and logistical support to achieve a significant level of influence over certain territories in the Anglophone region and provide some public goods and services. These included some education, justice, taxation and control of other civilian activities.[161]

These forms of governance by separatists changed over time, as the initial efforts of Anglophone groups to exercise governance dwindled between 2019 and 2020.[162] Diminished diaspora financial transfers and splintering between separatists reduced the support needed to run public institutions. Anglophone groups now struggle to provide – or have given up on providing – services. The Anglophone separatists' failure to maintain legitimacy – the fostering of 'willing obedience' – increasingly required exerting power and influence through coercion since 2019.[163]

Public service provision

Anglophone groups make broad claims of public service provision through their communication outlets and devote specific government offices to education, healthcare, security and justice.[164] When separatist groups began controlling certain areas and pushing out state forces in 2017–2018, they inherited some public infrastructure and institutions – albeit limited in comparison to the Francophone region.[165] In the course of the conflict, separatists also cut basic public services, such as water, electricity and phone lines, as a tactic to control local areas or punish civilians for violating rules like dead cities.[166] As the conflict continued, separatist provision of public goods and services waned. Some interviewees noted that this shift likely arose from a changing posture towards civilians and diminished funding from the diaspora.[167] While some non-profit and humanitarian groups have provided basic services, these groups also face violence from armed groups when perceptibly supporting the wrong side.[168]

Around 2019, some separatist groups attempted to run public schools in the Anglophone region. These schools continued until 2021 but ceased operations around that time – likely from a lack of coordination between separatist groups and diminishing diaspora support.[169] Instead of operating schools in the region, separatists now regulate school activities and impose closures or lockdowns, especially upon academic institutions operating with government support from Yaoundé.[170] Teaching became an increasingly precarious form of employment for civilians in the Anglophone region. In 2023, ACLED recorded nearly 50 events of violence targeting teachers, with 89% of the events carried out by separatists.

The widespread closure of government schools and frequent curfews prompted the opening of some private, community-run schools to fill the gap. While privately-run schools still require approval from separatists, separatist groups do not

provide further support for their operations.[171] Even with approval to operate, students have often been targeted by separatists in the Anglophone region – frequently as a part of kidnapping campaigns to raise funds.[172]

In addition to education, Anglophone separatists reportedly sometimes engage in the provision of justice, especially residing over land disputes or criminal cases.[173] The provision of justice in the Anglophone region played a strong role in the initial demonstration movement in 2016 and 2017, with the Common Law system in the Anglophone region creating a clear divide from the Civil Law system in Francophone Cameroon.[174] While the Common Law legal system received some concessions in 2018 and with the Special Status in 2019, many separatists find these provisions do not go far enough to address the imbalance between the Francophone and Anglophone legal systems.[175] In addition to the statutory courts, local chiefs have long played a role in mediation and traditional forms of justice in Anglophone Cameroon.[176] Customary authorities frequently become targets of violence by separatists due to suspected collaboration with Yaoundé.[177]

To pay for public goods and services, both separatists and Yaoundé demanded various forms of taxes and rents from civilians. Civilians often end up caught in the precarious situation of paying various fees to both authorities in contested areas but receiving little in return. So-called 'liberation taxes' have also become common, demanded by separatists in areas under their control and using physical violence towards those who are unable to pay the tax.[178] The taxes and fees demanded by each group vary and affect sectors differently. For example, some businesses favoured the payments required by separatists since the price was lower than the taxes paid to the Yaoundé government.[179] Others mentioned that separatist groups sometimes also played a role in supporting economies, such as supplying seedlings to farmers during planting season.[180]

Making governance difficult for Yaoundé

Since the beginning of the conflict, separatists have employed 'scorched earth' tactics to make governance in the Anglophone region difficult for Yaoundé. Lucas Cho Ayaba said in 2018 that, 'Our first aim is to make Ambazonia ungovernable. We must try to raise the cost of the occupation to higher than the profits they get here.'[181] The numerous natural resources in the Anglophone region make the area economically strategic for Yaoundé to maintain control over, especially in oil, hydroelectric power and timber.[182] To this end, separatist groups aim to paralyze revenue for Yaoundé or make it difficult to extend their control in the Anglophone region.

The most common separatist tactic for economic and social disruption involves 'Monday Ghost Towns,' developed from earlier strike action in 2016. Initially, civilians stopped work in the public or private sector on Mondays as a disruptive tactic to raise awareness of perceived mistreatment by Yaoundé in the Anglophone region. Similar to IPOB's ghost town orders in neighbouring Nigeria,[183] Anglophone separatist groups enforced this restriction on civilians, stopping anyone from going out to the market area, schools, traveling certain roads, or limiting other forms of movement as a form of disruption against Yaoundé. Separatists often attack civilians who violate these commands.[184]

In addition to the Monday restrictions, separatists tend to mark other days with restricted movement and activity – such as the annual 1 October remembrance of the independence declaration. Often, civilians completely desert markets and public areas in the Anglophone region due to threats from separatist fighters.[185] While Monday is the most common day each week for a ghost town, some stay-at-home orders persisted for weeks.[186] In addition to the lockdowns, other disruption tactics have been restrictions on civilians holding identification cards issued by the Yaoundé government, bans on products that would support Francophone businesses and forbidding the use of the French language.[187]

In some cities, such as Kumba, local government officials supporting Yaoundé have tried to end the lockdowns by stimulating economic activity and schools – largely through encouraging civilians to go to work and the market and for teachers and children to attend classes. Yet, many civilians still fear violence by separatists for violating the ghost town orders and choose to refrain from these activities.[188] Local officials and traditional chiefs in the Anglophone region face challenging tensions between separatists and the Yaoundé government, with the potential to face violence from Anglophones or military forces depending on their actions. In several cases, separatists use violence to control the right of taxation. For example, Ambazonian Restoration Forces opened fire on government council workers at the market in Muyuka town, Fako division, on 10 November 2023 to prevent the collection of taxes from vendors.[189]

These tactics by Anglophone separatist groups create numerous rules for civilians' day-to-day. While governance by separatists has deteriorated since 2019, separatists'

rulemaking and restrictions continue in the Anglophone region. A key aspect of these restrictions involves the aim of Anglophone armed groups to make governance challenging for Yaoundé. Limiting the extension of control from Yaoundé, in turn, provides space for the rebel groups' form of governance.

Control through violence

In addition to public service delivery and disruptive measures towards governance by Yaoundé, separatist groups increasingly used violence towards civilians to exert control in the Anglophone region. Initially, the harsh repression of civilians by state forces provided a rationale for the Anglophone cause and created some support from those living in the Anglophone region and supporters abroad.[190] As the outbreak of violence escalated in late 2017, state forces initially comprised the most active group targeting civilians (*see Figure 8*). In 2018 and 2019, military forces carried out around half of all civilian targeting events. State forces have used excessive violence when dispersing protesters, especially in the early months of the conflict during September and October 2017.[191] Civilian targeting by state forces led to the reported deaths of over 1 600 civilians from 2017 to 2023.

Over the course of the conflict, separatists themselves became increasingly violent towards civilians. By 2020, separatist militias targeted civilians in equal proportion as state forces, and they became the most dangerous group towards unarmed local populations in the Anglophone region by 2021.[192] Despite the stated political aspirations of separatist groups to represent the Anglophone cause and protect civilians from state forces,[193] many interviewees were critical of the treatment of civilians by separatist groups.

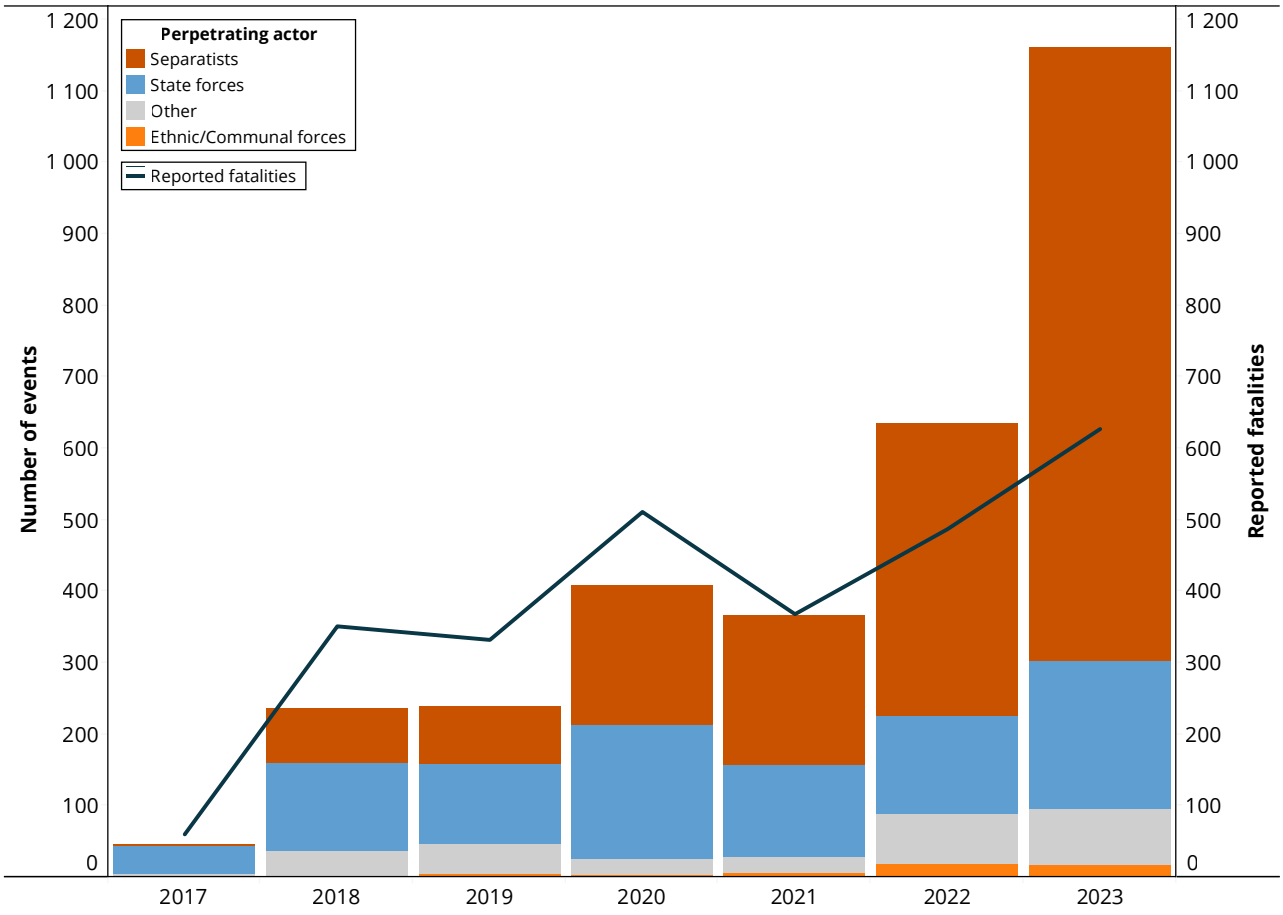


FIGURE 8 Violence targeting civilians in Anglophone Cameroon, 2017–2023.

SOURCE: ACLED data

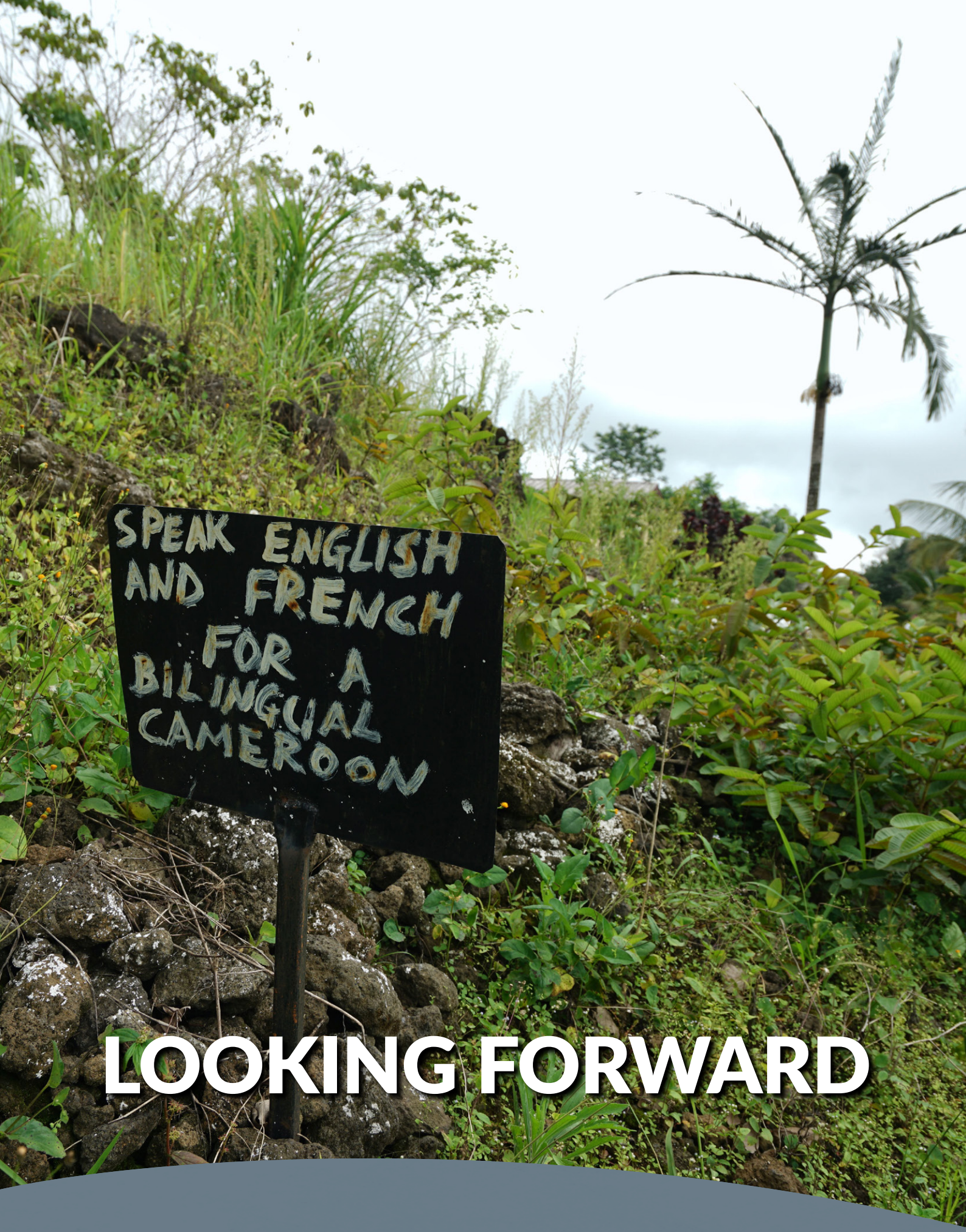
An empty residential area in Buea, Southwest Cameroon, as residents fled the violence between separatists and the Yaoundé government, 2019. *© Giles Clarke/ UNOCHA via Getty Images*

With the longstanding use of 'ghost town' tactics in the Anglophone region, the most frequently targeted group of civilians are those involved in various businesses, industries, trade unions and other types of labour groups who resisted the orders.[194] Given the tactics' aim of economic disruption, these groups have been the most affected by the frequent closure of economic activities. Separatist armed groups often use violence to enforce dead cities and keep civilians from engaging in business activities. Targeting civilians due to their labour affiliation has also become a key tactic to generate funds for militants. Nearly two-thirds of labour group violence by separatists involved kidnapping in 2022 and 2023, often with a ransom request.[195]

Separatist fighters also target civilians suspected of supporting the Yaoundé government – often referred to as 'black legs.'[196] The term 'black leg' refers to those suspected collaborators with the police or military, an enemy of the Anglophone separatist cause. Supposed treachery by 'black legs' has been a catalyst for violence throughout the conflict.[197] Mbororo have also been targeted as 'outsiders', along with local chiefs and government administrators.[198] Even fighters themselves can be labelled blacklegs. One separatist fighter mentioned that anyone who fled the area when fighting broke out was suspected of being a traitor to the separatist cause.[199]

The movement of separatists out of populated areas and into more rural parts of the region may be understood as a consequence of the violence towards civilians and declining support by local populations.[200] Civilians increasingly turned to the military and gave up the positions of Anglophone fighters to state forces, often in exchange for better security provisions. One separatist fighter himself recognized the brutality used by Anglophone armed groups against civilians and the waning relationship with locals in recent years.[201]

Overall, the rising violence targeting civilians by Anglophone separatist groups shows a dwindling level of security provision for local populations in the Anglophone region. The strategy of governance by separatist groups initially engendered civilian support – a condition favourable to insurgent activities – but this dwindled over time. The levels of violence targeting civilians and tactics to limit the reach of Yaoundé created detrimental consequences, namely alienation and resentment within the local communities and among the Anglophone diaspora. Moreover, this strategy led to economic losses for the more organized movements, due to diminished funding from supporters abroad. This depletion of financing for armed groups on the ground helped to entrench a reliance on abductions for ransom, taxation and extortion, and other illicit activity. Between 2018 and 2023, civilians have been targeted more in the Anglophone region than elsewhere in Cameroon and led to over 2 600 reported civilian fatalities.[202]



LOOKING FORWARD

© Giles Clarke/UNOCHA via Getty Images

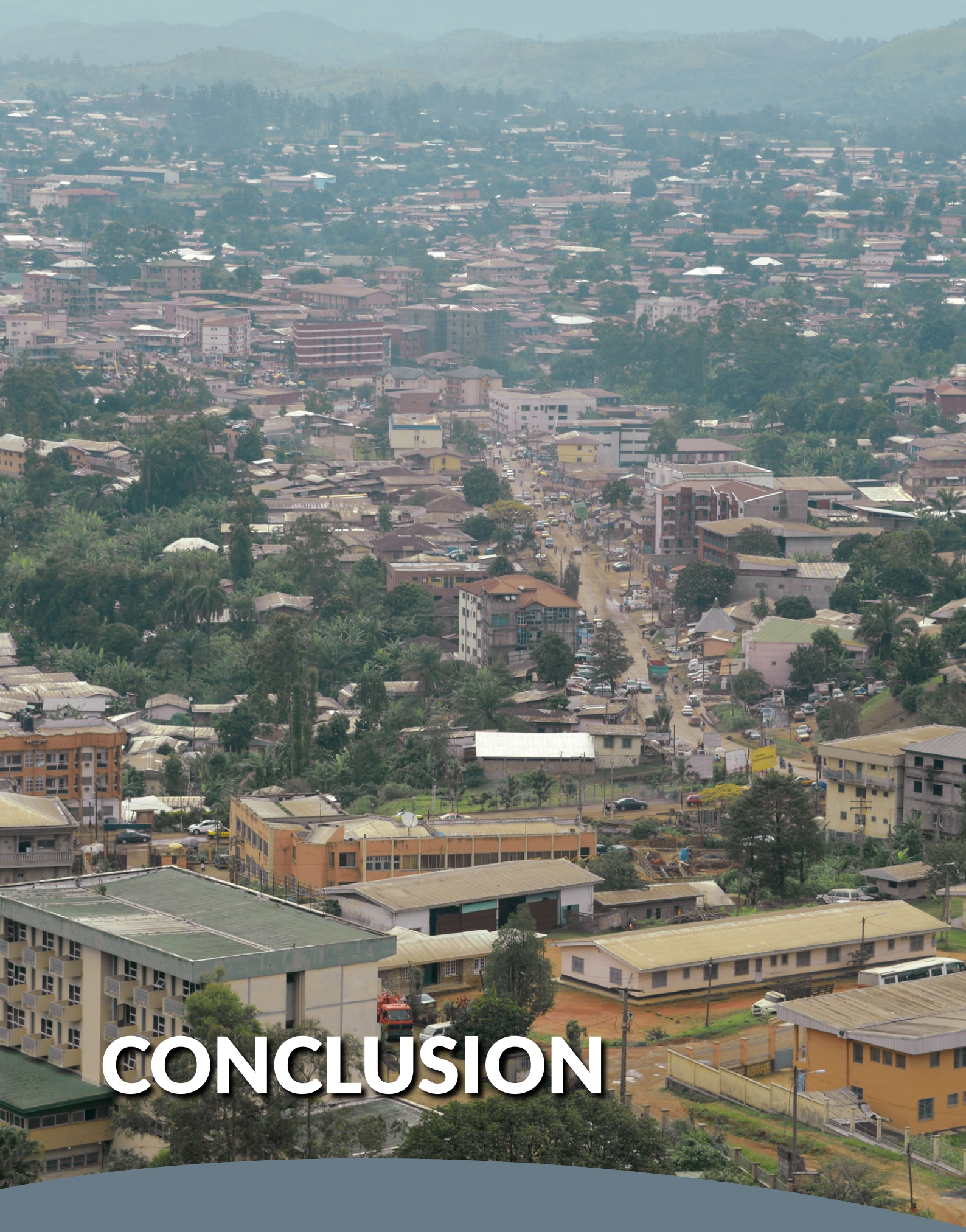
Recognizing the deepening divisions in Northwest and Southwest regions, separatist leader Sisiku Julius Ayuk Tabe called for further collaboration among Anglophone separatist armed groups in his New Year's message on 1 January 2024.[203] The declining capacity and competition between armed groups means they are unlikely to join forces in the near future, especially amid a proliferation of localized ethnic and communal militias complicating the violence. The number of armed groups is likely to continue growing until the underlying governance challenges are resolved in Anglophone Cameroon.[204] Some separatist groups may be holding out for political change in Yaoundé. However, the increasing number of separatist groups and competing demands weaken their negotiating position in relation to Yaoundé and make mediation and peacebuilding difficult, given the myriad interests.

Without a drastic change, separatist groups will not be able to make substantial headway towards a separatist region, nor is there a clear pathway towards resolution of the conflict. Stronger forms of decentralization with more decision-making power at the local level could potentially pacify more Anglophone groups,[205] but the special status of the Anglophone region – enacted in 2019 – has largely been a *de jure* solution with few tangible results.[206] The strategic natural resources in Northwest and Southwest regions will continue to be important for Yaoundé, making concessions for complete independence unlikely.

Civilian targeting played a crucial role in the emergence of the Anglophone conflict and will be an important driver of future dynamics. While recognizing the high levels of civilian targeting by separatist fighters, some supporters of the separatist cause justify tolerating the separatist groups due to the ongoing security threats posed by state forces, as well as enduring commitment to the Anglophone cause and identity.[207] However, if separatist groups continue to fund operations through kidnapping for ransom, civilians may increasingly turn to the state forces for protection. There have already been incidents of Anglophone civilians reporting the presence of troublesome Anglophone factions to the armed forces, although these have so far been rare.[208] Any governing force in the region that effectively protects civilians could gain an important upper hand in local support, a matter which may then influence the Anglophone diaspora.

International and local actors continue to attempt mediation to end the conflict, with Canada being the most recent to attempt negotiations.[209] Canada, and previously Switzerland, tried to facilitate mediation and numerous statements have been issued in support of resolving the crisis by the African Union, UN and US.[210] The Grand National Dialogue in September 2019 did not include separatist groups and ultimately proved unable to end the conflict.[211]

Further, the Anglophone diaspora has played a strong role in the conflict, especially in the early years, and durable peace-making may require the participation of key leaders and political groups abroad. Regulatory frameworks prohibiting dual citizenship limit the diaspora's ability to democratically participate in Yaoundé's politics, pushing many living abroad towards influence through the separatist movement.[212] The local dimensions of the conflict and new actors beyond the broader Anglophone political groups and coalitions are a key consideration for further mediation efforts.



CONCLUSION

The evolving relationship between separatist armed groups, local civilians and the Anglophone diaspora sheds light on the importance of armed group legitimacy in how a conflict unravels. Separatists initially built legitimacy by providing a degree of security against state forces' violence, some public goods and services through backing from the diaspora. Yet, Anglophone violence towards civilians, their use of kidnap for ransom, and their excessive taxation diminished local and transnational support. Coupled with the Anglophone strategies of destroying infrastructure and hampering economic activities, local and international confidence in separatists spoiled over time as the leadership for a unified Anglophone state.

In addition to losing local and international support, the conflict also shows how interactions with the civilian population formed a negative feedback loop. The Anglophone violence directed at civilians led to diminished funding, which only fuelled further kidnapping for ransom and extortion as the separatists increasingly relied on local sources of revenue. Separatists relied on extensive force – evidenced by the high levels of attacks on the civilian population – to mobilize finances and resources, and control territory in Northwest and Southwest regions.

The infighting and competition between groups limited the ability of Anglophone separatists to create a unified front. Despite some ongoing diaspora interest and involvement, the conflict has become increasingly local, with factions and internal divisions between armed groups. Separatists thus rely on insurgent tactics against military forces, allowing for the smaller and less-equipped Anglophone groups to continue operating from rural camps and populated areas. While this may benefit the interests and survival of these smaller armed groups, their criminalization has severely harmed the prospects for conflict resolution.

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