

POLICY BRIEF



Cameroon

Torn by Crises and the Long Road Ahead

Cameroon is a diverse country with multiple ethnic groups and two dominant linguistic traditions, English and French. Christianity is the majority faith, practiced by more than 60% of the population, alongside sizable Muslim and traditional faith communities.¹ The Constitution defines Cameroon as a decentralized unitary, secular, and democratic state and guarantees equality before the law under Article 1(2), as well as freedom of thought, conscience, and religion under the Preamble.²

Despite these constitutional guarantees, Cameroon is facing a complex mix of crises that have weakened governance and deepened social divisions. In the Far North, within the Lake Chad Basin, Islamist militant groups such as Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) continue to attack communities, specifically targeting Christians and their leaders.³ Churches and Christian schools have come under attack or are forced to close, and ongoing violence has displaced many Christians from their homes.⁴

¹ Herbert Rostand Ngouo, "Religion Weaponised: An Analysis of the Deployment of Religious Themes in the Discourse of Anglophone Nationalist and Secessionist Leaders and Activists in Cameroon," in *Religious and National Discourses* (July 2023), pp. 155–186.

² africaagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Const.ofCameroon2008.pdf

³ "Cameroon: Persecution Dynamics", World Watch Research, Open Doors, January 2025, pp. 11.

⁴ fides.org/en/news/76784-AFRICA_CAMEROON_Jihadist_attack_in_the_far_north_At_least_4_dead_and_severe_damage_to_a_parish_church

In the Anglophone North-West and South-West regions, fighting between separatist groups and government forces has left more than a million people in need of humanitarian help. Here too, churches and Christians are caught in the crossfire. The military often commandeers churches for military barracks. In both the Far North and the Anglophone regions, widespread human rights abuses by security forces, Islamist militants, and Anglophone separatists continue.⁵ Nine of the country's ten regions are now affected by insecurity.⁶

Although rich in natural resources, Cameroon remains economically underdeveloped. Weak governance, corruption and persistent conflict have worn down state institutions, leaving service delivery and the enforcement of the rule of law severely constrained.⁷

Extremist Violence and Insecurity in Far North

As noted above, the Far North continues to struggle with Islamist militancy. For more than a decade, civilians,

including many Christians, have faced repeated attacks from Boko Haram and ISWAP, the latter formed after a split within Boko Haram. Both militant groups aim to create an Islamic state based on a very strict interpretation of Sharia law.⁸

The violence began in Nigeria in January 2014 and later spread to neighboring countries. Apart from the violence and large-scale killings, these militant groups demand money from local Muslims by collecting *zakat*, an Islamic alms tax they say every Muslim must pay. They also force non-Muslims to pay *jizya*, leaving them with very few choices: convert, flee, pay the tax, or risk being killed.⁹ The militants also exploit the deep poverty and high unemployment in the areas under their control, and they pressure vulnerable community leaders into cooperating through threats and intimidation. At the same time, the militant groups take advantage of weak governance and corruption in local state institutions, which makes it even harder for authorities to respond effectively.¹⁰ In many cases, the militant groups force young men to join the groups, abduct women, and force them into marriage, or subject them to sexual violence.¹¹



A self-help group, supported by Open Doors, for women affected by Boko Haram's violence in the Far North of Cameroon.

⁵ globalr2p.org/countries/cameroon

⁶ [unicef.org/cameroon/media/3136/file/2025-Situation%20des%20enfants%20au%20Cameroun_ENGL_%20FINAL2.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/cameroon/media/3136/file/2025-Situation%20des%20enfants%20au%20Cameroun_ENGL_%20FINAL2.pdf)

⁷ bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/CMR

⁸ Ostaeen, P. V., & Aning, K., Status of ISWAP and ISGS in West Africa and Sahel, Counter Extremism Project, June 2023, pp. 2 – 3. Available at: counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/2023-06/CEP-KAS_Paper%202_Status%20of%20ISWAP%20and%20ISGS%20in%20West%20Africa%20and%20Sahel_June%202023.pdf

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 6

¹⁰ Global Extremism Monitor: Islamist Violence after ISIS, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, January 2020, pp. 38. Available at: icct.nl/sites/default/files/import/publication/Global-Extremism-Monitor-Islamist-Violence-after-ISIS.pdf

¹¹ unidir.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Findings-Report-39-Survival-and-Struggle-The-Experience-of-Women-and-Girls-With-and-After-Boko-Haram-1.pdf

Despite the Cameroonian government's increased coordination and information sharing among law enforcement, military, and intelligence entities,¹² security remains weak. Insurgents continue to exploit gaps along the border and carry out attacks with little resistance.

The Anglophone Conflict – Consequences for Churches and Christians

In 2016, Anglophone professionals¹³ in the North-West and South-West of Cameroon protested because they believed the government was marginalizing their regions. The state responded with heavy force, which fueled support for separatism and the rise of armed militias.¹⁴ While the Anglophone conflict is not a religious conflict, churches and Christians are often caught in the crossfire. Separatist groups and government security forces alike attack churches, accusing them of sheltering opposing groups or exposing them to violence from all sides. Churches are burned, pastors kidnapped, and congregations threatened, making it extremely dangerous for Christians to gather for worship in the North-West and South-West regions.¹⁵

Amid ongoing unrest, religious leaders in Cameroon's Anglophone regions have indicated their willingness to facilitate dialog between the government and separatist groups to resolve the protracted Anglophone crisis.¹⁶ Church leaders who try to broker peace are sometimes criticized for siding with the government.¹⁷

Humanitarian Impact and the Role of Local Faith Actors

In Cameroon's Far North, the conflict involving Boko Haram and ISWAP has created a severe humanitarian crisis. Insecurity has driven thousands from their homes, leaving many displaced families in crowded camps or makeshift settlements with little access to clean water, healthcare or safe shelter. Women and

girls face heightened risks of sexual violence and exploitation, especially where protection services are scarce.¹⁸ Without formal tenancy agreements, displaced people face constant threats of eviction, exploitation and repeated displacement. Militant groups frequently target facilities that provide basic services,¹⁹ and civilians are increasingly caught in violence as military operations intensify. Children are especially at risk, with ongoing abductions for trafficking or forced recruitment. The border areas of Mayo Sava and Mayo Tsanaga remain among the most insecure, suffering regular attacks that keep communities in fear and further restrict access to essential support.²⁰

In Cameroon's Anglophone regions, the humanitarian situation remains critical as civilians continue to face threats from both state forces and separatist armed groups. Abductions, arbitrary arrests, extortion and intimidation are common, while frequent lockdowns, roadblocks and targeted attacks severely restrict movement and disrupt daily life. Schools are regularly forced to close due to insecurity, and entire communities are displaced as fighting escalates, leaving families without stable shelter or reliable access to healthcare, education and other basic support services.²¹ The Cameroonian government hinders humanitarian operations by delaying permits, tightening approval processes, suspending NGO activities, controlling movement through checkpoints, enforcing no-go zones, and restricting access during security operations.²²

Local faith actors play an essential stabilizing and humanitarian role in both Cameroon's Far North and Anglophone regions. In the Anglophone North-West and South-West regions, church networks and religious health institutions have stepped in to provide humanitarian assistance, restore access to services and rebuild trust in places where state provision has broken down.²³ In the more remote Far North region, faith actors, including churches and mosques, often provide outreach, shelter support and mediation services in communities traumatized by attack, forced displacement and protection violations.²⁴

¹² Including the Directorate General for External Research, the National Army, the Rapid Intervention Unit (BIR), and the National Gendarmerie.

¹³ Professionals refers mainly to lawyers and teachers who protested the deployment of French-speaking judges and educators into the Northwest and Southwest regions.

¹⁴ European Parliament resolution of 25 November 2021 on the human rights situation in Cameroon 2021/2983(RSP).

¹⁵ "Cameroon: Persecution Dynamics", *Ibid.*, pp. 7.

¹⁶ Archbishop Andrew Fuanya Nkea, President of the National Episcopal Conference of Cameroon, emphasized that only genuine dialogue, not force, can bring lasting peace. Available at: aciafrica.org/news/14753/religious-leaders-ready-to-facilitate-meaningful-dialogue-to-end-camerouns-anglophone-crisis-catholic-archbishop

¹⁷ ucanews.com/news/catholic-educators-escape-death-in-cameroon-school-attack/102810

¹⁸ unidir.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/UNIDIR_Climate-Insecurity_and_displacement_Triple-Barriers-to-the-Reintegration-of-Former-Boko-Haram-Associates.pdf

¹⁹ Such as Primary Health Care centers and IDP camps.

²⁰ "Cameroon: Protection Analysis Update", Global Protection Cluster, Update on Protection Risks Caused by Protracted Armed Conflicts and Climatic Hazards, March 2025. Available at: globalprotectioncluster.org/sites/default/files/2025-04/pau25_protection_analysis_update_cameroon_march2025_final.pdf

²¹ "Cameroon: Protection Analysis Update", *Ibid.*, pp.7-11.

²² hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/cameroon

²³ gavi.org/vaccineswork/faith-based-organisation-bridges-immunisation-gap-conflict-affected-regions

²⁴ jiflc.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/final_ucl-yale_research_report-1.pdf

Recommendations:

To stop the continuous and severe violations of fundamental rights of citizens of Cameroon, Open Doors makes the following recommendations:

1 To reduce extremist violence in the Far North and protect civilians, including Christians and other vulnerable groups:

- **The Government of Cameroon** should:
 - » Strengthen its implementation of the Regional Strategy for Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience, the Lake Chad Basin's joint security and recovery framework, by establishing an inter-ministerial national coordination mechanism.
 - » This mechanism should link military operations in the Far North with civilian-protection and accountability measures, including investigations into and public reporting on violations by all forces, improved access to justice for victims, and alignment with regional and international human rights standards.
- **The International Community** should strengthen Cameroon's response in the Far North by providing technical training on intelligence-sharing and cross-border coordination, and by funding community-based early-warning systems through trusted local partners to help identify and report militant threats quickly and safely.

2 To address the Anglophone conflict and its impact on churches and civilians:

- **The Government of Cameroon** should:
 - » Issue and enforce clear operational directives to all security forces and armed groups aligned with the government prohibiting attacks on civilians and civilian objects, including religious buildings, schools, health facilities, markets, and humanitarian assets, and prohibiting the use of schools and places of worship for military purposes;
 - » Systematically document alleged violation of International Humanitarian Law by all sides, granting national and international monitors unhindered access, and prosecuting those responsible, regardless of rank or position;
 - » Launch a structured, inclusive dialogue with an agreed roadmap facilitated by credible and

mutually acceptable mediators, and include participation from church leaders and other religious actors, building on the lessons from the 2019 Major National Dialogue

- **The International Community** should:
 - » Provide neutral mediation expertise, while respecting local ownership;
 - » Use coordinated diplomacy, through embassies, the African Union, UN mechanisms, and regional partners, to press all parties to halt abuses, enable humanitarian access through demilitarized zones around key civilian infrastructure, and link cooperation with demonstrable progress in Cameroon's human rights obligations.

3 To improve humanitarian access and strengthen the protective role of local faith actors:

- **The Government of Cameroon** should:
 - » Lift administrative and security barriers that restrict humanitarian access in the Far North and Anglophone regions, establishing a clear, publicly available set of procedures and time limits for NGO registration, project approvals, and movement permits;
 - » Formally recognize and consult credible church networks and other local faith actors within protection and humanitarian coordination forums, and in coordination with them, establish transparent procedures that allow them to deliver aid safely and lawfully, including helping displaced families obtain the civil, land and housing documents they need to secure their tenure and restore their property rights when they return home.
- **The International Community** should expand targeted protection support in the conflict regions by prioritizing essential services, alongside increased flexible funding for psychosocial counselling, legal aid, medical care and safe-shelter support for civilians affected by violence and insecurity. All interventions should be implemented through trusted local partners, with strong accountability measures to ensure that assistance reaches those most at risk.