Education under Attack in Cameroon: The Effects of the Socio-Political Crisis on the Anglophone Sub-System of Education of the Anglophone Regions of Cameroon

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Abstract: Cameroon’s Anglophone regions have been the theatre of an armed conflict since late 2017 between government forces and Anglophone Non-state armed groups (NSAG). The sociopolitical crisis that started in 2016 has deteriorated overtime and has led to violent clashes between armed forces, killings, internal displacement and a growing atmosphere of fear, insecurity and incertitude. In late 2016, Anglophone Common Law lawyers and Teachers' Trade Unions organized peaceful strikes across the two Anglophone regions to denounce among others, the systematic assimilation process of the Anglo-Saxon legal and education system into the Francophone system. According to them, the educational system is made up of two sub systems: the Anglophone subsystem of education based on the Anglo-Saxon model and the Francophone subsystem following the French model, and each must maintain its peculiarities. In response to the strikes, the government clamped down on the Common Law lawyers and Anglophone peaceful protesters who joined the protests to denounce the perceived marginalization and assimilation of Anglophones. By late 2017, the situation quickly degenerated into an armed conflict with Anglophone Non-state armed groups transforming the teachers’ strike into a school boycott campaign, shutting down education in most parts of the Anglophone regions. As a result, the education sector came under attack by the burning of schools and attacks on students, teachers, parents and education officials by Non-state armed groups. This situation has had devastating effects on the education sector as several hundreds of thousands of school children and students have been deprived of education since 2016. The purpose of this paper is to examine the reasons why education is under attack in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon.

Keywords: Anglophone sub-system of education, Non-state armed groups, Armed Conflict, Education, Anglophone Regions

Introduction
Since late 2016, Cameroon’s Anglophone regions, i.e. the North-West and South-West Regions – whose grievances date back to the early 1960s – have endured turmoil and violence in what has become a human rights crisis (Amnesty International, 2017: 4). The current crisis in the Anglophone regions began on the 11th of October, 2016, in Bamenda when Common Law lawyers from the Anglophone North-West and the South-West Regions went on strike (International Crisis Group, 2017: 9-10). The Common Law Lawyers’ protests were met with heavy repression from the central government. Lawyers were beaten and their professional regalia seized (Nkongho, 2018: 10). On the 21st of November, 2016, Anglophone teachers also started a sit-in strike, which disrupted the conduct of schools in the two Anglophone regions. According to strikers, the educational system of Cameroon is made up of two sub systems: the Anglophone subsystem of education based on the Anglo-Saxon model and the Francophone subsystem following the French model, and each must be maintain its uniqueness. During the
strike, several thousands of people joined the teachers to express grievances on the marginalization of Anglophones. The security forces violently repressed the protests leaving several protesters dead, many others wounded, while scores of protesters were arrested and detained under deplorable conditions.

Further, on the 28th of November, 2016, Buea University students organized a peaceful protest on the university campus to call for the payment of the president’s achievement bonus to students, to denounce the banning of the University of Buea Students Union (UBSU) in 2012 and to protest against the introduction of a penalty for late payment of registration fees and the additional fee charged for accessing examination results. The Vice Chancellor of the University of Buea responded by inviting the police and the gendarmes in the university campus who brutally repressed the students and arrested some of them in their homes. Female students were beaten, undressed, rolled in the mud and one student was allegedly raped (International Crisis Group, 2017: 9-10). The unprecedented state violence on Common Law lawyers and Buea university students marked a dramatic turning point in the Anglophone crisis.

Towards the end of 2017, the situation quickly deteriorated. In October 2017, demonstrations organized across the Anglophone regions to celebrate the symbolic independence from the country’s French-speaking areas were met with unlawful and excessive deadly force. Cameroonian security forces shot dead several peaceful protesters and wounding many. Hundreds of persons were arrested, and thousands fled their homes, becoming internally displaced or refugees in Nigeria. At the same time, moderate voices began to be eclipsed as armed separatist groups, calling for separation and advocating for an armed struggle, grew in profile and support (Amnesty International, 2017: 5). The situation escalated rapidly when security forces applied excessive force to quell the protests. What followed was violence and armed confrontation between government forces and non-state separatist armed groups in the Anglophone regions (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

The multiple non-state armed groups fighting the government adopted a school boycott strategy, Monday ‘ghost towns’ and other spontaneous calls for shutdown of all activities in the regions, sometimes lasting several days and having a huge impact on children’s ability to attend school and learn (Akame et al., 2021). As such, from the onset of the Anglophone teachers’ sit-in strike and the Anglophone armed groups’ school boycott, Monday ghost towns and lock down campaigns in 2017, schools have remained shut down in most parts of the Anglophone regions. Armed separatists have been burning schools, attacking schools children, teachers, parents and education officials. Several schoolchildren, students and teachers have been killed, abducted and tortured by Non-state armed groups for disrespecting their school boycott injunctions. As a result, hundreds of thousands of school children have been deprived of education in most parts of the Anglophone regions. This article therefore seeks to examine the reasons why education has been targeted in the armed conflict and the impact of the armed conflict on the education sector of the Anglophone regions.

**Objectives of the Paper**

The objectives of this paper are:

1. To explore the conceptual discussions and review of some existing literature on armed conflicts and education;
2. To examine the concept of the right to education in the Anglophone regions;
3. To trace the genesis of the attacks on education in the Anglophone regions;
4. To review some cases of attacks on schools, students, parents, teachers and education officials in the Anglophone regions.

**Methodology**

This paper focuses primarily on primary and secondary sources in the collection of data. Primary sources consist of questionnaires. The main instruments used by the researchers were the
questionnaire and informal interviews. A total of 2 persons were interviewed while a total of 50 questionnaires were administered to 50 respondents using the Likert scale with open-ended and close-ended questions with options ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree and to a neutral option. For secondary data sources, the study relied on books, articles, journals, reports, newspapers and internet document search. Data collected from primary and secondary sources were subjected to critical contextual analysis and scrutiny. The paper made use of the purposive and random sampling techniques as sampling methods.

Table 1: Respondents Opinions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NO</th>
<th>ISSUES RAISED</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>NO</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Education is under attack in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon since 2016</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Non-state armed groups are responsible for the attack on education in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The state has failed to protect schools, school children, students, teachers, parents and education officials</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The attacks on education have deprived many school children and students of education for five years</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The attacks on schools, school children, students, teachers, parents and education officials can be considered war crimes</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors 2021

Analysis of Findings

Table 1 show that a total of 50 questionnaires with 5 questions each, making a total of 250 questions, were returned by 50 respondents, scoring a return percentage rate of 100%. A total of 122 respondents provided strongly agreed responses, making a total of 48.8%. On the other hand, 70 respondents responded with agreed responses, making a percentage rate of 28%. Meanwhile, a total of 37 respondents provided strongly disagreed responses, scoring a percentage rate of 14.8%. A total of 19 respondents responded with disagreed responses, thus providing a percentage rate of 7.6%. Finally, 2 respondents responded with no opinion responses, making a total percentage rate of 0.8%.

In addition, most of the internally displaced persons, children and teachers from the highly affected that we interviewed reported that there was no learning going on in their areas. According to them most of the school-age children are no longer going to school, some have left for more secured environments in other towns, while others are engaged in farming. The teachers, according to them have abandoned their jobs due to fear of being abducted or even killed by the Non-separatists armed groups.

Conceptual Discussions

Wars and military conflicts impair the functioning of education systems and often lead to extensive damage to the existing educational infrastructure. Millions of children are prevented from attending school as a consequence of violent conflicts. The hopes that the world would become a more peaceful place with the end of the Cold War have not yet been fulfilled. On the contrary, the number and intensity of violent conflicts have seen a further increase; violent conflicts, wars and civil strife unsettle the developing nations in particular. The extensive damage, as well as the subsequent social and economic costs in the wake of violent conflicts, are
a source of concern that the global development objectives, which the international community set itself at the beginning of the new millennium, cannot be met. This also affects education-oriented development objectives, such as those agreed upon within the framework of the “Education for All” process. Although attacks on educational facilities are regarded as war crimes under international law, schools are increasingly being focused on by warring factions. The humanitarian catastrophe, which war and civil strife represent for the civilian population, generally also implies an education catastrophe (Seitz, 2004: 8-9).

Violent conflicts have severe adverse effects on the overall education system and the supply of education in particular in three important ways. First, armed fighting is associated with the destruction of infrastructure and resources needed to maintain functioning education systems. Second, violent conflict leads to the breakdown of communities as a result of people fleeing (or being forced to flee) areas of violence, which affects how children are educated and under which circumstances. Third, violent conflicts often lead to distributional and equity effects in terms of who accesses which type of education that may prevent many from attending school (Justino, 2014: 4-5).

1. **Destruction of infrastructure and resources.** Some of the most visible impacts of violent conflict include the destruction of infrastructure, as well as the collapse of government provision of goods and services, including schooling, due to lack of financial resources or the diversion of finances to military efforts (Stewart et al., 2001a, 2001b).

2. **Displacement.** The disruption of schools and teaching is compounded in many conflict-affected contexts by the displacement of households (and sometimes entire communities) from violence affected areas, which severely disrupts the supply of education. While education is possible in some camps, this is often disorganized, temporary, under-resourced, overcrowded and limited to primary education (UNHCR/OSCE, 2002; Watkins, 2013).

3. **Distributional effects.** The combination of destruction and displacement results in severe constraints to the supply of schooling, the provision of quality education and the recovery of education systems in conflict-affected countries. It may also lead to important distributional effects along gender, ethnic, religious, economic or geographical dimensions that may affect not only the overall supply of education, but also shape inequalities in education access. During the conflict, certain individuals, households or groups may be prevented from accessing schooling (if at all available) due to restrictions to population movements, or the use of education and schools as a form of controlling populations and territories (by for instance limiting education to children of the ‘right’ ethnic or religious group, or by imposing certain languages or curricula in key areas) (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000; Shemyakina, 2011).

**Literature Review**

Education is arguably the public and social service that is least resilient to external shocks and is one of the first to be impacted by conflict and violence. Some 37 million children of primary and lower secondary age are out of school in crisis-affected countries. In 70 countries surveyed between 2005 and 2013, education facilities, students and staff had all been deliberately targeted by armed groups, with a significant pattern of attacks observed in 30 countries. Moreover, when school infrastructure has been damaged or destroyed, students may go without schooling for extended periods of time. In addition, many education buildings – including those being used for teaching – have been occupied by the military or otherwise used by state or non-state armed groups in the majority of countries affected by armed conflict over the past decade. Being in close proximity to weapon bearers also puts students – particularly children – at risk of abuse, such as forced recruitment, sexual violence or abduction. At best, the school learning environment may be disrupted by conflict (ICRC, 2017: 5-6).

The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA), states that more than 22,000 students, teachers, and academics were injured, killed, or harmed in attacks on education during armed conflict or insecurity over the past five years, according to Education under Attack 2020, a report published by the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA). More
than 11,000 separate attacks on education facilities, students and educators took place between 2015 and 2019. Armed forces, law enforcement, other state security entities, and non-state armed groups killed, injured, abducted, threatened, arrested, and detained more than 8,000 students, teachers, and other school personnel between 2015 and 2019 in all 37 profiled countries. These attacks were either directly targeted towards school students and personnel because of their status as learners, teachers or education personnel, or specifically impacted them. Attacks on education include bombing and burning schools and universities, and killing, maiming, raping, abducting, arbitrarily arresting, and recruiting students and educators at, or en route to and from, educational institutions by armed forces, other state actors, or armed groups, during armed conflict or insecurity (GCPEA, 2020).

Education under Attack 2020 disclosed that the number of countries experiencing attacks on education has increased in recent years. Between 2015 and 2019, 93 countries experienced at least one reported attack on education, marking an increase of 19 affected countries, up from 74 countries in the previous reporting period of 2013-2017. Attacks on education emerged in new countries, including Guinea and Nicaragua. In Burkina Faso and Niger, which were only minimally affected in prior years, attacks rose starkly, contributing to the closure of more than 2,000 schools. Non-state armed groups operating in these two countries carried out many of these attacks. The numbers of attacks on education remained alarmingly high in Yemen and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), with each experiencing over 1,500 documented attacks on schools. Afghanistan, Palestine, and Syria each experienced over 500 attacks on schools. In Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen, the widespread use of explosive weapons during targeted and indiscriminate attacks on educational institutions. The highest recorded numbers of teachers and students harmed by direct attacks were in Afghanistan, Cameroon, Palestine, and the Philippines (Tsolakis et al., 2020).

Armed groups or armed forces also targeted schools to recruit children. In the past five years, state armed forces or armed groups reportedly recruited students from schools in 17 countries. In Somalia, the United Nations verified that armed groups recruited at least 280 children from schools in 2017. Armed forces, security forces, or armed groups were reportedly responsible for sexual violence in, or on the way to or from, schools and universities in at least 17 countries in the past five years. Attacks on education not only kill or injure individual students and teachers; they also impact communities for years. With buildings or teaching materials destroyed and students and teachers living in fear, schools and universities close and some students never resume their education, impeding long-term development (Tsolakis et al., 2020). GCPEA tracks five types of attacks on education, as well as the military use of schools and universities:

- Attacks on schools;
- Attacks on school students, teachers, and other education personnel;
- Military use of schools and universities;
- Child recruitment at, or on the way to or from, school;
- Sexual violence at, or on the way to or from, school or university;
- Attacks on higher education (Tsolakis et al., 2020).

**International and National Legal Framework on the Right to Education in Armed Conflict Settings**

International humanitarian law does not establish a right to education, but it does, however, contain rules that are aimed at guaranteeing that, in situations of armed conflict, education can continue. In particular, the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol I specifically address education with regard to the following situations in international armed conflict. Additional Protocol II (AP II) obliges parties to a non-international armed conflict – states and non-state armed groups alike – to provide children with a number of fundamental guarantees (ICRC, 2017: 7). The right to education, as laid down in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948: 26), has been reaffirmed in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR, 1966).
Rights, ranks among the fundamental human rights. In numerous human rights documents, principles of international humanitarian law, international agreements and declarations by world conferences, it is stressed that this human right to education is also valid during emergencies, wars and armed conflicts (Lenhart, 2003: 89-95).

In this respect, educational facilities are also given special protection under international humanitarian law: their destruction is regarded as a war crime. Moreover, numerous international law documents refer to the basic task of education in contributing to peace, tolerance and understanding between peoples, and also emphasize the right of every individual to receive quality elementary education, which is obliged to the protection of human rights and reinforcing individual and collective peace, even in the context of complex emergencies. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 lays down in Article 26 the right of every individual to education. Education should be free and obligatory, at least at the elementary and primary levels. It states that:

Education must be oriented to the full development of the human personality and to strengthening respect for human rights and basic liberties. It must foster understanding, tolerance and friendship between all peoples and all races or religious groups, and support the activities of the United Nations to uphold peace (Seitz, 2004: 31).

The right to education is further specified in Article 13 and Article 14 of the Pact on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966, as well as in Article 18 (freedom of parents to decide on the religious and moral education of their children). The Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 on the protection of civilians in times of war states, among other things in Article 24, that in the event of the military occupation of a country, the occupying powers have to ensure that facilities are provided which serve to protect and educate children. The Additional Protocol I of 1977 states that schools and other buildings, which serve civilian purposes, are to be granted absolute protection from military attacks. The Additional Protocol II on the protection of victims of non-international armed conflicts states that education for children is one of the fundamental guarantees even in civil war situations and states under Article 4 (3) that:

Children will be given the care and assistance they need, in particular (a) they receive the education, including religious and moral education in line with the wishes of their parents, or – if there are no parents – the persons who have to take care of the children (Seitz, 2004: 31).

Article 8 of the Rome Statute on the International Criminal Court (1998) states that:

With international armed conflicts, as well as armed conflicts, which do not have an international character, all “premeditated attacks on buildings which are devoted to religious services, education, the arts, sciences and charitable purposes are war crimes”, which fall within the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court (Seitz, 2004: 32).

Additionally, international human rights law protects education, both through the right to education per se and by recognizing the importance of education for the realization of other human rights. Regardless of its applicability in situations of armed conflict – which raises difficult legal issues – it will always apply in other situations of violence. The right to education is also enshrined in several international human rights law instruments, and education features prominently in several regional frameworks. The right to education, like all human rights, imposes three levels of obligations on states: the obligations to respect, protect and fulfill. In other words, states must refrain, and prevent others, from interfering with the enjoyment of the right and adopt appropriate measures towards its full realization. The right to education is an economic, social and cultural right. Parties to an armed conflict have a general obligation to take all feasible precautions to protect the civilian population and civilian objects under their control against the effects of hostilities. These obligations also apply with respect to schools and other education facilities, and with respect to students and teachers (ICRC, 2017: 7-8).
The Genesis of the Attack on Education in the Anglophone Regions

Education is a key component of the Anglophone crisis: on the one hand it has been significantly affected by the crisis; on the other hand, strikes related to education issues have been a driver of the conflict. Since the independence of Cameroon in 1961, the government’s focus on the Francophone regions over the Anglophone ones has translated into the perceived marginalization of the North-West and South-West Regions, gaps in governance and development, prioritizing Francophone sub-systems in competitive public examinations and dual systems, including education. Because of a lack of harmonization in the education system, weak nationwide promotion of bilingualism, and undiversified allocation of resources, children and adults have started experiencing increased constraints to studying under the English education system in the North-West and South-West Regions, contributing to the current crisis. The armed groups’ boycott of formal education in the North-West and South-West Regions has prevented children from attending school and has led to a learning impasse (ACAPS, 2021).

The offshoot of the Anglophone crisis, which trigger the attack on education in the Anglophone regions, started on the 21st of November, 2016, with Anglophone Common Law lawyers’ and teachers’ trade unions protests and sit-in strikes. International Crisis Group (2017), states that the strike actions were aimed at protesting against the perceived assimilation of the Anglophone education and legal traditions inherited from the British former colonial masters into the dominant Francophone system. This came after the teachers’ and the lawyers’ trade unions petitioned the government to address their grievances without success (International Crisis Group, 2017). The striking Anglophone lawyers and teachers converged together and formed the Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium (CACSC), an organization consisting of lawyers and teachers’ trade unions from the Anglophone regions of Cameroon led by Agbor Felix Nkongho, Fontem Neba and Tassang Wilfred, with the objective being to adopt a common front against the government. In response, the government of Cameroon created ad hoc committees to negotiate with the lawyers and the teachers (Reuters, 2017).

The government of Cameroon created an ad hoc committee to dialogue with members of the Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium (CACSC) led by Tassang Wilfred, representing the Consortium and higher education minister, Jacques Fame Ndongo, representing the government in Bamenda in January 2017. The first meeting was not fruitful, as the consortium members demanded the release of all those arrested by the government before any dialogue; meanwhile, more cases of arrest continued and were condemned by the Consortium members in the bid to solve the Anglophone problem. They presented a draft for federalism, which was condemned by the government, and on the 17th of January, 2017, through a ministerial decree signed by Minister Rene Emmanuel Sadi, the CACSC and Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC) were banned and their activities described as illegal and against the security and unity of Cameroon. On the same day, Agbor Felix Nkongho and Fontem Neba, two members of the Cameroon Civil Society Consortium, were arrested (The Standard Tribune, 2017).

Following the arrest of the Consortium leaders, amidst continuous government violent crackdown on peaceful Anglophone protesters, the crisis quickly morphed into an armed conflict with non-state armed groups imposing ghost towns and school boycott on the population. The U.S. Congress (2019: 2), asserts that separatists launched a campaign to pressure school officials in the North-West and South-West Anglophone regions to go on strike as part of school boycott against the government of Cameroon, and reportedly began burning school buildings, threatening education officials with violence if they did not comply with the boycott, and kidnapping for ransom children and teachers who defied the boycott (U.S. Congress, 2019: 2). Since 2017, the separatists have demanded the closure of schools and threatened or burnt down establishments that have remained open. Consequently, the pupil and students attendance has fallen drastically and many pupils and students have dropped out. The majority of schoolchildren in most parts of the Anglophone regions have not been to school for two or three years; unwanted pregnancies are increasing among young girls; and many families are pressuring their children into working.

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Even if the conflict were to end now, it would be difficult for these children to go back to school (International Crisis Group, 2019: 10).

More than 200 schools have been attacked and several are occupied by government forces or non-state armed groups. Meanwhile, teachers and students have been threatened, kidnapped, and beaten (Petrigh, 2021). During the years that followed, numerous separatist attacks on the educational sector in the South-West and North-West Regions, including arson attacks on school facilities and physical assaults on administrative staff, faculty and students, disrupted the normal operation of schools. For example, many students and teachers were absent during the 2017-2018 school year (U.S. State Department, 2018: 31). Abuses perpetrated by the separatists included threats against teachers and parents aimed at preventing them from sending their children to class, attacks on schools, killings, kidnappings, and extortion of civilians and state workers. These attacks on schools and harassment of teachers and students have caused massive disruption of education in the two regions (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

Fig. 1: School Boycott Warning Sign


Defiance of calls for school boycott and other lockdown measures have led to daunting repercussions. Students, teachers, and stakeholders of schools accused of ‘violating the boycott’ have been targeted. In addition, confrontations between non-state armed groups and state security forces around the vicinity of schools have sometimes led to casualties and caused trauma to pupils and students. Such instances have led to the suspension of school activities for several weeks, affecting many schools within the vicinity of the confrontation and beyond. In addition to the threat of or direct acts of violence leading to school disruptions, other factors such as social media misinformation, false alarms and panic have led to the further disruption of school activities. The school boycott strategy has had a severe impact on children’s ability to attend school and learn. UNICEF reported that as of January 2020, nearly 900,000 children in the North-West and South-West Regions of Cameroon have been impacted by the crisis and in accessing education. Meanwhile, schools and school pupils/students have continued to be subjects of attack and violence (Akame et al., 2021).

**Attacks on Schools, Students, Teachers and Education stakeholders**

Since 2007, “there have been thousands of reported cases of students, teachers, professors, academics and other members of the educational community being taken prisoners, held in captivity, beaten, tortured, burnt alive, shot by rebels, armies and repressive regimes. Some have been imprisoned or raped by armed groups or forces in schools or on their way to school”. Due to their privileged position as conveyors of knowledge, their access to the most vulnerable
members of the population, and their embrace of political ideals that are respected by the community, those within the teaching profession are a very tempting prey for armed groups and the military. This is evidenced in the report education under attack (UNESCO, 2010: 14). In view of this situation, the teaching profession’s fear of going to work is more than evident and justified, leading to reduced staff and increased teacher/pupil ratio in places where conflict is in effect. The lack of educational staff increases the difficulty of responding to the educational needs of children and even reduces the possibility of access to education (Duarte and Cano, 2016).

Attacks on students, teachers and schools violate various provisions of international human rights law and domestic criminal law. In situations that rise to the level of armed conflict, international humanitarian law – the laws of war – also applies and is binding on all parties to a conflict, both the government and warring factions. Under humanitarian law, schools and educational institutions are civilian objects that are protected from deliberate attack and any attack on them is unlawful. In addition, the use of school facilities by national armed forces or other armed groups is prohibited (Coursen-Neff and Sheppard, 2011). In Cameroon, non-state armed groups threatened, abducted, beat, and, in some instances, killed students and school personnel for defiance of the groups’ boycott on education in the North-West and South-West Regions. Students and teachers who broke the school boycott imposed by separatist groups in the North-West and South-West Regions were routinely kidnapped, threatened, injured, or killed (Tsolkakis et al. 2020).

Since 2016, many schools, especially in rural areas, have been closed in the North-West and South-West Regions as part of the boycott against education, and most of them cannot reopen because of threats of violent attacks. Non-state armed groups and unknown assailants have damaged, destroyed, or burnt down at least 74 schools in the North-West and South-West Regions since the beginning of the conflict in June 2019. The number of teachers has diminished in the North-West and South-West Regions, as teachers fear reprisals from the separatists who oppose education and learning. Many teachers fled to other regions of the country or were forced not to teach (ACAPS, 2021). Between October and December 2020, the United Nations recorded 35 attacks on schools including the “killing, torture and abduction of students and teachers, as well as arson of education facilities”. Of those attacks, 30 were carried out by separatist groups resulting in 10 civilian deaths and 67 abductions. The five other incidents involved government security forces including the “accidental discharge of weapons” near schools and resulted in five civilian injuries. Schools have been a main point of attack since the beginning of the conflict when separatists called for a boycott on education to draw attention to the increased use of French in the classroom and reliance on monolingual French-speaking teachers (Craig, 2021).

### Table 2: Operational Schools in the NW and SW Regions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Operational Schools in the NW and SW Regions</th>
<th>Number of Operational Schools October–November 2020</th>
<th>Number of Existing Schools</th>
<th>% of Operational Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary schools in the NW Region</td>
<td>730</td>
<td>3,127</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary schools in the NW Region</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>558</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total schools in the NW Region</td>
<td>873</td>
<td>3,685</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary schools in the SW Region</td>
<td>837</td>
<td>2,185</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary schools in the SW Region</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>352</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total schools in the SW Region</td>
<td>926</td>
<td>2,537</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total schools in the NW and SW Regions</td>
<td>1,799</td>
<td>6,222</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: OCHA (2021)

Some Selected Cases of Attacks on Schools

During the period of conflict, all infrastructures suffer damage as a result of bombing, fires and combat. Centres of learning are no exception. Both schools and universities, as well as museums, hospitals and other governmental buildings are damaged and looted. When considering the
reasons for these attacks and thinking of the context in which conflicts occur, it can be deduced that the ideological confrontation between the opposing factions incites them to attack those places where the population may be indoctrinated, either as a means of recruiting followers or attacking and hurting the enemy (Duarte and Cano, 2016). This is reminiscent to the situation in the North-West and South-West Regions of Cameroon schools have been gratuitously attacked by armed groups to enforce the separatists’ school boycott strategy.

Schools in the North-West and South-West Regions have been closed since the beginning of the crisis in 2016 as part of the ‘ghost town’ operations and lockdown days periodically led by the separatists. The boycott is seen by the separatists as a means of pressuring the government, justified by their broad rejection of governmental institutions. Some schools have not reopened because of the threat of attacks from the violent separatists against both people and education facilities. Because of the widespread school closures and attacks on school buildings, teachers, and students, schools in the North-West and South-West Regions lack basic learning and teaching materials, including textbooks, desks, and writing materials. This is coupled with a disparity in resources between different education programmes and between private and public education (ACAPS, 2021). The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), raised alarm on the increased attacks on educational institutions in Cameroon’s North-West and South-West Regions by stating that there has been an alarming spike in attacks on schools and education centers in the country’s two Anglophone regions, which have been marred by violence since 2017 (Forku, 2020). The spike in attacks has increased exponentially as the conflict raged on.

Ahead of the resumption of the school year in September 2017, the media reported that unknown attackers partially burnt down over half a dozen schools at night. The burning of schools, irrespective of their language of instruction, continued in a number of localities throughout late 2017 and early 2018. Between February 2017 and May 2018, for example, at least 42 schools in the Anglophone regions were attacked, including 36 that were damaged by arson attacks, 11 damaged by other types of attacks, as well as two school buses burnt down and various harassments and attacks on students and teachers. At least three teachers were killed during the same period and two school principals kidnapped. These attacks on schools and harassment of teachers and students have caused massive disruption of education in the two regions (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

On the 17th of October, 2017, an arson attack was carried out on Catholic Primary School in Menji, South-West Region; on the 4th of November, 2017, four schools were burned down in Jakiri, including Jakiri Bilingual High School; meanwhile, on the 24th of November, 2017, an arson attack was perpetrated on Government Bilingual High School in Menji, South-West Region. In addition to closing educational facilities, schools have been used by parties to the conflict as bases, barracks, fighting ground and places of detention in contravention to international law that guarantees the right to education, life, liberty and security, the protection of civilians and civilian objects; and against the spirit of the Safe Schools Declaration, which Cameroon endorsed in September 2018 (Akame et al., 2021).

As of June 2018, UNICEF indicated that 58 schools had been damaged in the two regions. In general, these arson attacks occurred late at night or in the early morning. Claims of responsibility do not appear to have been left at the scene of attacks. However, a media report states that following an arson attack on the Government High School Bafut on the 8th of May, 2018, a note was left calling for no schools to operate. Government schools, non-denominational private schools, and Catholic, Presbyterian, and Baptist schools have all been targeted for attacks. The separatists’ attacks on education, analyzed by many in the North-West and South-West Regions as an attempt to render the regions ungovernable, have created an environment that has been preventing tens of thousands of children from attending classes over the past two school years (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

In mid-2019, UNICEF estimated that at least 74 schools had been destroyed in the two regions since the crisis began in late 2016. By November 2019, the organization estimated that 90% of
public primary schools (more than 4,100) and 77% of public secondary schools (744) were closed, despite the new school year starting just a few months prior (UNICEF, 2019). In October 2020, at least 140 of these schools reopened for the new school year, but about 20 had reclosed in the North-West Region alone a few weeks later (Kindzeka, 2020). The result is that, as of January 2020, nearly 900,000 children in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon have been impacted by the crisis and do not have access to education, which has nearly doubled the original number reported in January 2019 (466,000) (UNICEF, 2019). Many of these students have not received formal education since the crisis began four years ago, and the number of impacted children continues to increase (Akame et al., 2021).

**Some Selected Cases of Attacks on Students**

On the 4th of November, 2018, armed separatists kidnapped 79 students and their principal from a Presbyterian boarding school in Cameroon’s restive North-West Region. A video, purportedly of the kidnapped children, was released on social media by men who called themselves Amba Boys. In that video, the kidnappers forced several young male students to give their names and the names of their parents. On the 7th of November, 2018, the kidnapped students were released after being held hostage for about two days. Despite the posting of the video, the circumstances surrounding the mass abduction remained unclear as several Anglophone separatist groups have denounced the hostage-taking, claiming that the entire situation was staged by security forces as a means of vilifying the secessionists (Durbin, 2018).

On the 20th of November, 2018, armed separatist fighters kidnapped 9 students and a principal from Lords Bilingual Secondary School Kumba. BBC News reported that gunmen entered the Lords Bilingual School on Tuesday afternoon causing panic and kidnapped some students. However, Cameroon’s security forces rescued the kidnapped students and one teacher after a raid on the camp of separatist fighters in the South-West Region on the 21st of November, 2018 (BBC News, 2018). The *Journal du Cameroun* (2018), reports that at least 17 students of the University of Bamenda who were Kidnapped by unidentified armed men were freed on the 13th of December, 2018. A document signed by the Secretary General of the North-West Region Governor’s office revealed that the children were released thanks to the coordinated operations of administrative authorities, forces of law and order and parents. *Mimi Mefo Info* (2019), reports that close to 300 students of Saint Augustine’s College Nso, in Kumbo, Bui Division in the North-West Region of Cameroon were kidnapped on the 16th of February, 2019, by yet to be identified individuals and taken to an undisclosed destination. They were released few hours later under yet to be established circumstances. Though the Presbyterian Church did not accuse any group or person, the Cameroonian government authorities and separatists blamed each other for the kidnapping.

Human Rights Watch (2020), states that on the 24th of October, 2020, gunmen stormed a private school in Cameroon’s Anglophone South-West Region killing 7 children and injuring at least 13 others. At least nine gunmen arrived on motorbike at Mother Francisca International Bilingual Academy in Kumba’s Fiaango neighborhood at about 11 a.m. on October 24. They broke into a second-floor classroom and opened fire on students. They continued shooting as frightened children ran for their lives, jumping from the staircase and screaming. No one claimed responsibility for the killings, but the government has accused armed separatists who have called for a boycott of education in the Anglophone regions since 2017. The vice president of the Ambazonia Interim Government, one of the main separatist groups, said in a statement on October 25 that Cameroonian soldiers carried out the attack. On the day of the attack, Cameroon’s communications minister announced an investigation. Four days later, the minister announced that security forces had “neutralized” a separatist fighter who was allegedly among those responsible for the attack.

The violence witnessed in schools in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon for the past 4 years is unprecedented. The recent coldblooded killing of 8 children in their classroom in Mother Francisca International Bilingual Academy in Kumba on October 24, sent shock waves
throughout the country and attracted international condemnation. This gruesome attack represents one of the lowest points in the school crisis and many believed it should signal a clarion call for concrete measures and solutions to be put in place to avoid a repeat. Yet, many were still skeptical about the response and measures to prevent a repeat. Not long after the attack on October 24, there were incidents of kidnapping, torture and humiliation of students and teachers in both the North-West and South-West Regions in early November 2020 (Akame et al., 2021).

The Journal du Cameroun states that on the 14th of October, 2021, an officer of the National Gendarmerie reportedly shot to death a child who was going to school in the early morning in Buea, South-West Region of Cameroon. This recent case, according to eyewitness account, the child was being accompanied to school in a vehicle with her mother when the gendarme stopped them around the check point in Molyko- Buea. An argument ensued between the driver of the vehicle and the gendarme and in an attempt to park the vehicle off the road, the gendarme is said to have immediately opened fire from the back, which burst through the back screen of the vehicle before hitting the child who died instantly. The angry crowd immediately descended on the scene to effect mob justice on the gendarme who was also killed, while protesters temporally paralyzed activities in Buea. These attacks continued right into the end of the year 2021, with teachers and education officials highly targeted (Journal du Cameroun, 2021). In a similar circumstance, a 7-years-old little girl was shot and killed by a policeman in Bamenda, North-West Region, on the 12th of November, 2021, as she was returning back from school.

- **Some Selected Cases of Attacks on students, Teachers and Education Officials**

  The U.S. State Department (2018: 33), states that on the 21st of January, 2018, in Nkambe, in the Donga and Mantung Division of the North-West Region, unidentified men set the dormitory section of St Rita’s Secondary School on fire after the management defied the school boycott called for by separatists in the Anglophone regions. On the 28th of April, 2018, on the outskirts of Muyuka, South-West Region, three gunmen on motorbikes shot and killed Sophie Mandengue Maloba, a pregnant school teacher. The incident occurred three days after a similar attack on a school in Kumba took place where assailants riding motorcycles shot and killed the discipline master of the government bilingual high school and chopped off the three fingers of a student.

  Human Rights Watch (2018: 23-24), states that in 2018, armed separatists abducted at least three principals whose schools had opened. On the morning of the 30th of April, 2018, the principal of St. Bede’s College, Father William Neba, in Ashing near Belo, North-West Region, was reported to have been abducted while celebrating mass with students. He was released two days later while the school suspended classes on the day of the abduction. On the 25th of May, 2018, in two separate incidents just days before the start of the national exams, the principal of Government High School Bolifamba, Mile 16, Georgiana Enanga Sanga, and the principal of Cameroon Baptist Academy Muyuka, Eric Ngomba, were kidnapped. They were later released after spending several days in captivity.

  The Daily News Cameroon (2019), reported that the residence of the Regional Delegate of Secondary Education for the South-West Region, was attacked on the 3rd of February, 2019, by suspected armed separatist fighters who set her vehicle ablaze. The armed men launched the attacks just after midnight at her residence in Soppo, a neighborhood in Buea, setting her service car ablaze before taking off (Daily News Cameroon, 2019). Smart Njikang Gabriel on Equinox TV Pigin News of the 6th of February, 2019, reported that on the 6th of February, 2019, armed men attacked Government Bilingual High School Zavion, Babadjou, Bamboutous in the West Region. They burnt down several school buildings and a vehicle while also ransacking school offices (Molua, 2021). It should be noted that teachers and education stakeholders continue to be killed, kidnapped and tortured by Non-state armed groups as the conflict rages on between government forces and non-state armed groups who continue to hold education hostage in the Anglophone regions through school boycott, ghost towns and lock downs.
Recommendations and Way Forward

It is incumbent for the government to create community schools in lieu and place of government schools as the Non-state armed groups are more tolerant towards community schools. According to the NSAG, they have completely lost trust in all government run institutions.

Communities can also be encouraged to create community schools as a stop gap measure for the functioning of schools. This is because, based on observation and experience in the field, NSAG do not attack community schools but they do attack public and private schools.

Non-governmental organizations, faith-based organizations, social and in peace building education initiatives and development of school infrastructure development organizations and civil society organizations should be more proactively involved in the peace building initiatives and development of school infrastructure.

Government and other donor organizations should engage in the provision of a special education contingency fund to rebuild educational establishments destroyed and to identify victims as a result of the crisis.

There is a dire need to for the intensification of social studies in schools with the aim of developing character education, national integration, unity in diversity and harmonious living together. This will go a long way to consolidate democracy and tolerance amongst us and highlight the role of the school as a psycho-social clinic and counseling centre.

We must also convene a National Education Council to look into problems bedeviling the education sector in a bid to propose lasting solutions taking into consideration the problems that spark off the crisis.

The National Commission for the promotion of bilingualism and multiculturalism should step up its fight against acts, activities and issues that can compromise the spirit of unity in diversity and living together. In the education milieu this can be achieved by setting up bilingual clubs, educative talks, write ups and essays, sports and artistic competitions, holiday camps etc. Above all, re-launch the quest for civic education and responsible citizenship.

International Organizations and NGOs and civil society’s organizations should strive to increase the scope of their activities in order to better serve and reach out to the population of war torn areas. These may include assessment and analysis of situations, advocacy, Information and sensitization, communication, referral and response mechanism. Other measures include physical safety and security, community mobilization etc.

Conclusion

The crisis on education and the gratuitous violence meted on students, teachers and education stakeholders have had an unprecedented devastating impact on the education sector in the Anglophone regions. The majority of schools especially in the rural areas have remained closed and hundreds of thousands of students have been deprived of education due to the armed conflict and violence in the two English-speaking regions. In order for schools to fully resume peacefully in the entire Anglophone regions, there is a need for the belligerents to agree to a ceasefire and a cessation of violence. The Non-state armed groups have to put an end to the school boycott, ghost towns and lockdowns injunctions and allow the unfettered resumption of education in the two regions. The parties to the conflict have to respect their obligation under international human rights and humanitarian laws to refrain from attacking schools, students, teachers and education officials, their commitment to the Safe School Declaration and the need for perpetrators to be held accountable. Since education is one of the immediate root causes of the conflict, a meaningful and genuine reformation of the Anglophone education sub-system by the government as a positive response to the Anglophone teachers’ demand is the right approach towards the right direction to an effective education system that would effect positive social changes in the conflict-torn Anglophone regions.

In this light, Justino (2014: 8), states that building formal education systems in the aftermath of
violent conflicts is a task riddled with severe supply and demand side constraints. Countries during and emerging from destructive violence may not have the financial capacity to rebuild schools, and provide simultaneously for many other competing needs. At the same time, families may have limited incentives to send children to school during and immediately after conflict. However, education is critical for the economic recovery of households and countries affected by conflict. A dual prong approach is therefore necessary. On the one hand, formal education systems must address inequalities caused by the conflict in order to reduce potential risks associated with conflict re-ignition. On the other hand, formal education systems must include incentives to bring children affected by conflict and poverty shocks back to schools. Two broad strategies are outlined: the first is about educating children and young people as agents of positive social change. The second is about building the enabling environment for more effective education systems in conflict-affected countries by addressing specific poverty, vulnerabilities and aspirations of individuals and household affected by violence.

References


