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‘Crisis in the Republic of the Cameroon’

House Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health and Global Human Rights

Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ), Chairman
Opening Statement
Excerpts of Remarks
June 27, 2018

Our hearing today will examine human rights abuses and targeted killings in the Anglophone region of the Republic of Cameroon. We will explore the roots of this emerging crisis, and U.S policy options for addressing human rights violations and instability in the Anglophone region, which affects not only stability in Cameroon, but also in the region.

The increased tempo of government repression is fueling secessionist sentiment, leading to instability in the country in advance of presidential elections scheduled for October. Cameroon’s political stability is of great importance to the US because the country plays a critical role in American counterterrorism efforts against Boko Haram in the west and central Africa.

We also have ongoing concerns about 85-year-old strongman Paul Biya, who has either served as Prime Minister or as President since 1975 and who seems disconnected if not at odds with many of the people he is supposed to serve – particularly the English-speaking minority.

As the U.S is involved in training and equipping Cameroonian security forces to strengthen regional capacity to combat terrorism, it is necessary to re-evaluate further

counterterrorism cooperation with Cameroon to ensure the protection of Cameroonian civilians and respect for civil and political rights – including the most fundamental of rights, the right to life.

Understanding the history of Cameroon – or, rather, “the Cameroons,” as the choice between the singular and plural form is fraught with significance – is necessary for understanding the present crisis.

While it is a country of great African ethnic diversity, the main dividing line is linguistic, reflecting a colonial past which saw the French-speaking region gain independence from France in 1960 and union with the southern portion of the former mandate territory of British Cameroon the following year.

The country that was formed was the Federal Republic of the Cameroon, and the national flag that was adopted had two stars, signaling to the world the union of two coequal states under one constitution. English speakers were always a minority, however, and the political and constitutional basis under which they entered into a union eroded over time.

In 1972, then-President Ahmadou Ahidjo abolished the federal system of government and created a unitary “United Republic of Cameroon.” The flag was not changed until 1975 to reflect this new imposition of monist rule, when the two stars gave way to one. In 1984, President Biya again revised the Constitution, which changed the country’s name to the present “Republic of Cameroon.” The current Constitutional iteration dates back to 1996, and *on paper*, at least, restores a certain degree of federalist autonomy in response to Anglophone demands.

The reality is, however, different.

In 2016, the central government triggered a crisis by appointing French-speaking teachers and judges in the Anglophone areas.

To English-speakers, it felt like an occupation. Certain Anglophone activists declared independence of a “Federal Republic of Ambazonia” in 2017, which had led to a heavy-handed response by the military.

Security forces have reportedly burned down villages, arrested and killed protesters in Anglophone areas, though it also must be noted that French-speaking teachers have been targeted by English-speaking separatists.

As Congress, we need to address whether we can continue to cooperate with Cameroon’s security forces, given the reported abuses, and if so, how.

As the International Crisis Group – which is supplying one of today’s witnesses – has emphasized the Cameroonian government’s use of the military against its English-speaking citizens has exacerbated the situation. Indeed, our US Ambassador to Cameroon Peter Barlerin has criticized Cameroon’s actions and has expressed his concerns about the government’s use of disproportionate force.

The Anglophone crisis casts a shadow upon the upcoming presidential elections. The credibility of the election, slated for October, is already under question as the government has yet to make serious preparations. It is assumed that strongman Paul Biya will run for re-election, but given his age and frequent absences abroad it is uncertain who will succeed him eventually.

There are also growing humanitarian concerns attributable to the Anglophone crisis. An estimated 160,000 people have been displaced within Cameroon, and over 21,000 Cameroonians have fled to neighboring Nigeria as refugees.

The continued malign presence of Boko Haram in northeastern Cameroon, attacking people in both Cameroon and in Nigeria, is a further complication which has led to an estimated 96,000 Nigerians fleeing the other way to Cameroon. Congress must then also weigh the need to assist Cameroon in its fight against Boko Haram.

Given all these spillover factors, we can see that a failure to solve the Anglophone crisis is not purely a domestic affair, but a regional one which implicates US security interests.