

# CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT IN CAMEROON

A HANDBOOK ON THE PREVENTION OF CHILD SOLDIERING.



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## **About**

This handbook is part of a two-year project on ‘Improving human rights protection in the conflict-affected regions of Cameroon’ co-funded by the European Union and implemented by CHRDA in partnership with REDHAC. The overall objective of this project is to achieve full respect of basic human rights and fundamental freedoms in the crisis-affected regions of Cameroon (Far-North, North-West and South-West), contributing to end gross and systematic human rights violations and abuses in these regions.

The specific objectives of the two-year project is to improve the capacity of right-holders in the crisis-affected regions to access protection and to participate in the surveillance of human rights and fundamental freedoms. One of the specific objectives of this project is also to increase the engagement of duty-bearers to effectively respect / enforce human rights and to fight against impunity, reducing the space for perpetrators of abuses and violations.

The Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa (CHRDA) is an independent and apolitical non-governmental organization. The Centre is a non-profit making organization with the mission to promote and protect the respect for human rights and democracy.

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## INTRODUCTION

With this document, CHRDA focuses on the situation of children in the North-West and South-West Regions of Cameroon affected by armed violence. The UN classifies children as all persons below the age of 18.<sup>1</sup> Most recently, on October 6, 2022, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, UNICEF, and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, jointly reminded Member States of the UN again about the importance to respect and ensure the rights of all children around the world and to recognize and protect all persons under 18 years.

The UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict has been monitoring the situation in the two regions closely. The Secretary-General on children and armed conflict inform the UN Member States in report A/75/873S/2021/437 (21 June 2021) that the UN has verified several grave violations against children in the Far North, North -West and South-West Regions in 2020. Such grave violations include but are not only limited to the following:

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1 <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/2022/10/all-persons-below-the-age-of-18-years-are-children-upholding-all-the-rights-of-all-children-everywhere-at-all-times/>

- a) Killing and maiming of children. During armed conflicts, children are always victims of maiming and killing. This is because of their direct and indirect participatory roles in armed conflicts. Children recruited into armed groups are most often used as human shields while some are used to carry out suicide attacks, hence the high level of deaths and other forms of degrading and cruel treatment meted on children.
- b) Recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups. These children are either recruited to participate indirectly as porters, suppliers, cleaners, and informants or directly in physical combat. These children are always exposed to the worst forms of violence especially due to their vulnerability.
- c) Sexual violence against children. Children are often subjected to diverse forms of sexual violence like rape and forced marriage. Most often than not, these violations are not reported, hence, victims of such violations die of trauma while perpetrators go scot free. This violence is severe, especially on girl children who are often victims of unwanted pregnancy and some exposed to sexually transmitted diseases.
- d) Attacks against schools or hospitals. Schools and hospitals which are considered as highly protected areas during armed conflict have suffered attacks. Schools sometimes are used as military bases while children, teachers as well as hospital staff have been targeted. These acts go a long way to worsen the health situation and also increase the level of illiteracy especially among children. There have been reports

of teachers as well as students abducted from schools and asked to pay ransoms for their release.

- e) Denial of humanitarian access for children. The blocking of safe passages for humanitarian access has been increasingly used as a war tactic by warring factions to weaken one another. Humanitarian personnel most at times are attacked and their materials destroyed. This usually leads to untold misery, especially for children blocked in inaccessible or enclaved areas who have been deprived of food, shelter, and medical supplies.

## Annex 1: WHO IS A CHILD SOLDIER?



The concept of child soldier has been defined by several international Legal instruments including International Human Rights Law and International Humanitarian Law. These legal instruments also provide for



the protection of Children in armed conflicts by prohibiting the recruitment of children by parties to an armed conflict.

According to the Geneva Convention (IV), relating to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Times of War (1949) in its Article 50, paragraph 2, occupying powers may not enlist children in Formations or Organizations subordinate to it. This is buttressed in Additional Protocol I (1977) to this Convention in its Article 77(2) which is to the effect that `` the parties to the conflict shall take all feasible measures in order that children who have not attained the age of Fifteen years do not take part in direct hostilities and, in particular, they shall refrain from recruiting them into their armed forces. In recruiting among those persons who have reached the age of fifteen years but who have not attained the age of eighteen years, the parties to the conflict shall endeavour to give priority to those who are oldest. According to Article 4(3)(c) of Additional Protocol II to this Convention, ``Children who have not attained the age of fifteen years shall neither be recruited in the armed forces or groups nor allowed to take part in hostilities.

The Cape Town Principles (1997) defines a child soldier as **any person under 18-years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers, and those accompanying such groups, other than purely as family members. It includes girls**

**recruited for sexual purposes and forced marriage. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms.**

Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Group (2007) further notes that **A child associated with an armed force or armed group refers to any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities.**

From the above definition, it can be noted the concept of child soldier is not limited to children who are actively involved in hostilities but also extends to the use of children as:

- Porters to transport equipment.
- Spies to provide information about the opposite camps.
- Cooks for the fighters.
- Also most grievously for sexual purposes.

Worthy of note is also the disparity when it comes to determining whom to be considered of ages. While some conventions point to the fact that

persons recruited below the age of 15 are those to be considered as child soldiers, some conventions provide that the age limit is 18 years.

## **1. LEGAL FRAMEWORK.**



### **1.1 INTERNATIONAL LEGAL, POLICY, AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK TO PROTECT CHILDREN.**

Since 1996, the issue of children affected by armed conflict has been placed firmly on the international agenda, beginning with the ground-

breaking report of Graça Machel and the establishment of the mandate of the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict.

Since then, a solid body of international legal standards has been elaborated. For example, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court classifies the recruitment of children into fighting forces as a war crime and a crime against humanity. **The International Labour Organizations Convention No. 182** defines child soldiers as one of the worst forms of child labour. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child outlaws child soldiering, and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child established 18 as the minimum age for children’s participation in hostilities.

Here are links to some of the most important documents defining how the world should act to protect its children:

DATES	INTERNATIONAL TREATY/LEGISLATION
10 May 2002	<a href="#"><u>A World Fit for Children</u></a>
6 Sep 2000	<a href="#"><u>United Nations Millennium Declaration</u></a>

25 May 2000	<a href="#"><u>Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict</u></a>
25 May 2000	<a href="#"><u>Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography</u></a>
17 Jun 1999	<a href="#"><u>International Labour Organization, Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour</u></a>
12 Jul 1998	<a href="#"><u>Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court</u></a>
25 Jun 1993	<a href="#"><u>Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action</u></a>
11 Jul 1990	<a href="#"><u>African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child</u></a>
20 Nov 1989	<a href="#"><u>The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)</u></a>
8 Jun 1977	<a href="#"><u>Geneva Convention – Additional Protocol I</u></a>

8 Jun 1977	<a href="#"><u>Geneva Convention – Additional Protocol II</u></a>
12 Aug 1949	<a href="#"><u>The Fourth Geneva Convention</u></a>
10 Dec 1948	<a href="#"><u>Universal Declaration of Human Rights</u></a>
26 Jun 1945	<a href="#"><u>United Nations Charter</u></a>

## **1.2 NATIONAL LEGAL, POLICY AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK.**

Cameroon has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict.

In the Declaration on acceding to the Convention, the Government of Cameroon stated that;

Pursuant to article 3 (2) of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, the Government of Cameroon declares the following:

- There is no conscription in Cameroon. Recruitment into the defence forces is voluntary, and forced military service does not exist.
- The minimum age for entry into the defence forces and national service is eighteen (18) years, pursuant to article 2 of Decree No. 2001/187 of 25 July 2001, which establishes the conditions for recruitment and admission to officer training schools; article 12 of Decree No. 2001/190 of 25 July 2001 on the specific status of defence force personnel below the rank of officer; and article 30 of Law No. 67/LF/9 of 12 June 1967 on the general organization of defence.

In addition to the measures above, Cameroon stated that it has put in place further policies and safeguards that ensure there is no involvement or recruitment of child soldier by the state:

- Recruitment is widely publicized in the media;
- Prior to admission to military service, reliable proof of age is required of all candidates, i.e., a certified copy of the candidates birth certificate no more than three (3) months old;
- Candidates who are not eighteen (18) years of age or older must provide the written, informed consent of a parent or legal guardian;

- A background check is conducted to confirm the accuracy of the information provided by the candidate;
- Candidates undergo a medical fitness examination;
- During training, members of the defence forces are fully informed of the duties associated with military service;
- The defence forces provide the public with regular information on the duties associated with military service, through radio and television broadcasts as well in the print media.



## **2. HOW ARE CHILDREN AFFECTED BY CONFLICT (THE SITUATION OF CHILDREN IN CAMEROON)**

### **a) SCHOOL BOYCOTTS: (VIOLATION OF CHILDREN'S RIGHT TO EDUCATION)**



This is the most problematic violation in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon affecting children and their right to education. For the past six years, school doors have remained closed in Anglophone regions as non-state armed separatist groups enforced a ban on school

attendance, and in areas where schools have managed to operate, insecurity due to deadly skirmishes carried out on school premises has continued to scare most parents from sending their children to school. Schools and teachers have been central to the Anglophone crisis since protests against the regions decades of marginalization began in 2016. In October 2016, teachers and lawyers trade unions organised demonstrations demanding an end to Francophone domination in their institutions. By the end of November, students had joined in, leaving schools empty. As the Cameroonian government brutally suppressed these demonstrations, the Anglophone Civil Society Consortium, which was spearheading the movement at the time, called for civil disobedience in the form of boycotting businesses and schools.

The few schools that re-opened faced reprisals. The first attack on a school occurred in February 2017 near Kumba in the Southwest Region. In May, a government primary school in Bamenda that was preparing to host exams was burnt down. It is not clear who carried out these attacks, but it is likely they were motivated by activists in the diaspora who had begun to advocate for a violent approach. On 24 October 2020, armed men attacked another school in Kumba. They killed seven students and injured others several more.

When conflict then broke out in January 2018, separatist fighters added the threat of violence and attacked schools that defied the boycott. In April 2018, high school staff member Thomas Nkongho was killed by

secessionist fighters. Days later, primary school teacher Sophie Maloba was executed. Some other teachers were kidnapped. This use of violence was encouraged by activists in the diaspora.

These attacks continued at the start of the academic year in 2018. In August, Ayeah Ngam Emmanuel, a teacher's trade unionist calling for school resumption, was abducted. Then, on the first day of the term, armed individuals attacked the Presbyterian School in Bafut, kidnapping teachers and students. By the end of 2018, at least 43 schools had been attacked or burned.

As of 31 July 2019, more than 700,000 children – representing 9 out of every 10 children in Anglophone Cameroon – had been out of school for nearly three years (OCHA, 2021). In Anglophone Cameroon, about 80% of schools were closed (OCHA). Two months into the start of the 2019 school year, about 90% of schools remained closed (UNICEF, 2019).

The 2020 school year was marked by an alarming surge in attacks on students, teachers and schools that compromised effective learning. Separatist political leaders and non-state armed groups imposed 84 days of movement restrictions (Ghost Towns and Lock Downs) which stopped effective schooling.

Security and living conditions continue to deteriorate after six years of War, causing many schools to stay closed at the beginning of 2022. The World Bank indicated many schools have been attacked or vandalised

since the beginning of the conflict. Such attacks on schools have left many learners out of the school system especially in the North-West and South-West regions.

There has been a dramatic drop in school enrolment: during the 2016-17 and 2017-18 academic years, enrolment fell by 37% in primary education, 49% in general secondary education, and about 50% in technical and vocational secondary education (Regional Delegation for Basic Education (DREB 2020). Some of the displaced pupils have been absorbed by schools in other regions.

Teachers are among the most affected groups. Approximately 15,838 primary school teachers do not have access to their schools (World Bank 2019). The regions equally experienced a drop in the number of teachers (UNICEF 2019). In the North-West: 45,187 teachers prior to the War and 4,937 teachers since the war: representing a decline of 89.1 percent. While in the South-West: 19,026 prior to the War and 3,652 since the war: a drop of 80.8 percent.

The War has impacted academic performance in official end-of-course examinations:

- The overall pass rate dropped from 91.4% in 2015-16 to 60.6% in 2017-18.

- The number of learners registered for end of primary school public exams fell by 97.3% between 2017 and 2019. Of those who registered to take the exam, only 54% actually did.

In secondary and high schools, there was a huge drop in results at all levels from 2016 to 2017:

- GCE Advanced Level: 35.32% pass in 2017, from 66.52% in 2016.
- Advanced Level Technical Education: 22.37% pass in 2017, from 54.33% in 2016.
- GCE Ordinary Level: 25.29% pass in 2017, from 62.17% in 2016.

The War has pushed children to go to schools in other regions, where class sizes have grown to up to 110 learners per class (as was the case with Government Bilingual Primary School New Bell Bamileke 1 in Douala) in the 2018–19 academic year (UNICEF and Plan International, 2019). The quality of education in these regions has suffered. In 2018-2019 in eight schools, there was an average of 8 students per reading textbook, 91 students per mathematics textbook, 125 per second language textbook, and 200 per science textbook. Over the same period, the pupil-to-teacher ratio moved from 76.9 to 78 pupils per teacher (UNICEF and Plan International, 2019).

This pattern of reprisals against schools and children has continued up to now, with the vast majority of children in the two Anglophone regions

unable to attend school. The official reason separatists have given for opposing the resumption of schooling is that it is not safe for students due to the conflict. It is widely assumed that the real reason for the policy, however, is so that they can use it as leverage in negotiations with the Cameroonian government. When a delegation of female leaders travelled to the US to discuss reopening schools with separatist leaders, for instance, they were told that the issue could only be addressed as part of official negotiations.

On September 5<sup>th</sup> 2022, schools resumed for the academic year 2022/2023 in Cameroon. Most schools in the Francophone section of the country opened their doors to receiving schoolchildren, but this was unfortunately not the case with schools in most parts of the English-speaking regions of the Northwest and Southwest. On August 22, 2022, the campus of PSS Mankon in Mezam Division was invaded and set ablaze by unknown gunmen, while on August 29, 2022, the Senior Divisional Officer for Boyo, Mr. Tegha Fidele, signed a prefectural order prohibiting the existence of 27 community and clandestine schools. It should be noted that some of these schools are mission schools owned by the church, and others have been created and run by non-state armed groups (NSAG).

These severe threats to the educational system through the attack on schools, learners, and teachers have a more significant impact beyond the numbers presented here. The Anglophone War is premised on protecting

people's rights. These figures indicate that the war is seriously affecting the population especially the most vulnerable persons within these communities.

They indicate the uncertain future for children who have not been able to attend school or have access to basic education for nearly seven years. Some of these children have been forced to attend school in other communities, which opens them up to further human rights violations. These occur essentially because children are placed with relatives or friends who might abuse or neglect the children.

The majority of out-of-school children lack the means to flee to the safety of cities or to other regions. Violence and the lack of schooling expose them to additional risks such as the search for income through illegal activities (cross-border trade) or even criminal activities (kidnapping, theft, prostitution); forced recruitment by an armed group; and exactions by the armed forces, who suspect them of being Ambazonian separatist sympathizers. Meanwhile, because of the large number of deaths, many girls must now take care of their younger siblings. They are also victims of sexual assault by both armed groups and government forces. Human trafficking is happening and is heavily underreported in this particular War. There are also frequent reports that some girls have joined the armed groups.

On July 11, 2022, the United Nations Office of the Special Representative for the Secretary General for Children in Armed Conflict issued a statement on Grave Violations Against Children in Cameroon (Far North and Northwest and Southwest Regions), stating that 174 violations have occurred including *inter alia*: 22 attacks against schools and hospitals, 55 abductions, and 75 killings and maiming.<sup>i</sup> Of the 174 violations, 80 took place in the Northwest and Southwest Regions.<sup>ii</sup>

These attacks on schools underscore the fact that educational institutions have remained a target throughout the Anglophone Crisis since it started in 2016. As the crisis deepened, some factions of armed separatist fighters began to call for a limited form of schooling in areas where the security situation permitted, while others insisted on creating ‘community schools’ managed by NSAGs or complete closure of all schools.

During the 49<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), the United Kingdom issued a statement on Cameroon stating that: We remain concerned about human rights in Cameroon, including attacks on and restrictions to education. All actors should stop attacking and obstructing schools, children, and teachers. We continue to urge impartial investigations to hold perpetrators of violations and abuses to account. We reiterate the need for a continued and broad dialogue.”<sup>iii</sup>

At the same event, the European Union also issued a statement on Cameroon stating that: The EU remains concerned about the grave human rights violations and abuses committed by both state and non-state actors



in Cameroon and calls for accountability for all abusive actions. The EU strongly condemns the attacks on schools, children and teachers. In the Far North regions, the EU strongly condemns the attacks committed by the Boko Haram group and reaffirms its commitment to the fight against terrorism. In the North-West and South-West regions it urges the parties, to implement confidence-building measures, make use of existing mediation formats provided by third parties and engage in an inclusive political dialogue. The EU calls on the government to abide by its international human rights obligations and urges all parties to put an end to all violence and civilian suffering. Civil and political rights continue to be restricted nationally.”<sup>iv</sup>

On February 15, 2022, the representatives of diplomatic missions in Cameroon including Canada, Norway, South Africa, Switzerland, UK, and USA issued a joint statement on the right to education in Cameroon, reiterating that children have the right to education and their education will be vital in ensuring the continued vibrancy in the Anglophone communities in the Northwest and Southwest Regions. They urged stakeholders to respect UNSCR 2601 on protection of education in armed conflict and take steps to stop attacking schools, teachers, and children; and to publicly support the right to attend schools, and hold to account those who work to deny access to places of learning.

### **3. SPECIFIC CHILD PROTECTION RISKS IN THE ANGLOPHONE CRISIS**

#### **a) Unaccompanied and Separated Children.**

One of the major highlights of the Anglophone crisis has been the mass displacement of the civilian population. Displacements occurred due to reprisals and collective punishment where the Defence and Security Forces (DSF) as well as non-state armed groups (NSAG) carried out offensive raids in towns and villages, razing down homes and sometimes with their inhabitants. As of November 2022, CHRDA has documented over 250 villages burnt. These raids usually results in displacement of the civilian population as they flee violence. As of November 1, 2022, OCHA reported that at least 2 million people have been affected by the conflict in NW/SW regions and over 6 hundred thousand internally displaced while 85 thousand Cameroonian refugees live in Nigeria. While the population flees violence, there was among them unaccompanied and separated children. These are children who either lost their parents or got separated as they fled in different directions when their homes were raided. The number of unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) is another disturbing consequence and child protection risk that has been highlighted by the conflict. These children sometimes stay with family members, other times with strangers or in informal foster homes and sometimes they are left to fend for themselves.

While informal foster care or kinship care was an already existing practice rooted in society. However, this practice has become especially problematic in the context of the crisis. An increasing number of parents are sending their children to less safe or controlled environments that would have otherwise not been their first choice as a way for their children to escape violence or access services and opportunities they can no longer access at home. The loss of their caregivers and the lack of financial support put these children at a higher risk of violations such as child labour, physical and sexual abuse, early marriage, and recruitment into armed forces.

There are many reasons why this crisis has led to so many children being abandoned or separated from their families. On one hand, there are many children that are sent away by their families to find education opportunities, usually to other regions unaffected by the Anglophone crisis or to more urban areas in the North-West and South-West regions in which schools are operational and safer to attend. Additionally, many children are separated because of their parents having to flee for safety, and other UASC have lost their parents because armed groups killed them.

## b) Child Labour



Considering the continuous closure of schools and other educational facilities due to the ongoing socio-economic crisis in the NW/SW region, child labour has turned out to be one of the most prominent issues affecting children in this conflict (Danish Refugee Council, 2021).

This is concerning in a context in which children engaging with work is considered as “normal”, as long as they get paid and they still have the time to help around the household and do their chores. However, the fact that there is a high number of reports of child labour by community members suggests there has been a change in this behaviour and children are now engaged with labour in ways that are “not normal”, such as

working longer hours, more dangerous jobs or being paid less than what is accepted to be able to cover their basic needs.

There are many factors contributing to the continuation of this issue. In addition to the schools being closed, many families struggle to fulfil their basic needs as the sources of income they had before the crisis are no longer accessible. NSAGs and military using farmlands and other property as hide-outs, families having to abandon their properties and lands whilst fleeing for safety, and property destruction by armed groups are some of the ways in which these sources of revenue are rendered inaccessible. Without the possibility of cultivating the land or collecting rent from some of these properties, families often send their children to work as an alternative source of income. In addition, there is also a growing number of unaccompanied or separated children as well as child-headed households who find themselves having to find ways to provide for themselves and their families.

Based on normal practices in the communities, children as young as 5 years old work in farms, walking long distances to reach their workplaces, where they are hired to weed, plant, harvest and dig holes for produce such as cocoa, yams, orange, corn, etc. Other children, between 8 and 17 years old work transporting goods by pushing wheelbarrows as heavy as 100kg or in construction sites. Girls as young as 9 years old are also reported to work mostly by selling food in markets and quarters.

The engagement in child-labour further exposes children to other protection risks. Spending so much time unsupervised and often working in sites far away from their houses puts children at heightened risk of kidnapping, recruitment into armed forces, and GBV (especially girls). Additionally, not having the opportunity to play and spend time with their friends due to their obligation to work robs children of a healthy childhood and may affect their cognitive and social development.

### **c) Children Associated with Armed Forces & Armed Groups (CAAFAG)**

Forceful recruitment of child soldiers has been noted as one of the major effects of the conflict on children in the NW/SW regions in Cameroon. On Friday, July 24, armed separatist fighters under the lead of a man known as “Field Marshal”—the head of an armed group known as the Red Dragons—conducted an operation in a local market in the village of Essoh-Attah, in Fontem Subdivision, Lebialem Division of the South-West Region. In this operation, he rounded up close to 80 boys and men and forced them to join the armed struggle as fighters. Note should be taken that this mass abduction in Lebialem was the second in a short space of time, occurring just few days after another separatists “General”, known as Ayeke, kidnapped 67 children and started demanding ransom from their families.

Although this is not an issue that is frequently discussed, Children are recruited and used as informants, cooks, messengers, wives to soldiers, mechanics, etc. According to sources, children whose houses are used as storage for packing, are obliged to arrange the guns, clean and carry them to assigned destinations. In other cases, children who spend much time in the bush for farming purposes are given assignments to relay messages. Young children who have been separated from their families have been brought to the camps of NSAGs where they are kept and trained to perform different tasks. According to FGD participants, this is especially the case boys of around 14 years old who act as bike repairers for motor bikes used by fighters, while others are used as guards. Additionally, girls are also reportedly taken as girlfriends or wives by NSAG members.

There are different reasons why children join these armed groups. While some of them are forcibly recruited, others join armed groups out of basic need and lack of opportunities. Repression and abuse by state and security services, persecution, denial of rights and access to justice, discrimination as well as corruption are also pushed factors for children being recruited into armed groups. Some joined voluntarily because they are being radicalized. This was the case of 17 years old Makene, a young boy who joined the separatist armed group in Kumba in the southwest region because the Defense and Security Forces shot and killed his father and set their family house ablaze. The need for revenge pushed him to joining armed separatist fighters who promised him protection. Indeed, many

children (mostly orphans, unaccompanied or separated) who are unable to care for themselves and lack family support voluntarily join armed groups seeking protection and provision of their basic needs.

CHRDA also noted that misinformation and fake news is one of the push factors why children joined armed groups. Propaganda and fake news has a direct impact on the psychological and social mind-set of young people and they are attracted to things which they see on social media. Cameroonians in the diaspora are the main brain behind such propaganda and the use of fake news. In the context of the conflict in NW/SW Regions, they keep manipulating the youths with promises of jobs in ministries, embassies and in the military in an imaginary state called “Ambazonia” where in they shall be appointed to serve when the independence of Southern Cameroons is eventually achieved. They manipulate the young people through the internet to put their lives on the line while they are living in safe havens abroad. However, there is a concerning trend of children voluntarily joining or expressing desire to join armed groups not out of need, but because of the influences around them.

#### **d) Physical and Sexual Violence.**

Sexual violence has also been recorded, as children; girls, are increasingly seen to be exposed to sexual abuse, especially in



communities experiencing the armed conflict where girls have been sexually abused multiple times and perpetrators often go scot free. In highly insecure communities, it has been noticed that the perpetrators can either be community members, NSAGs or state defence forces (SDFs).

This increase in sexual violence against children can be attributed to many factors. Firstly, the highly insecure environment created by the conflict enables the proliferation of all kinds of violence. For example, the possession of weapons by different actors or community members gives them a sense of power and makes the rest of the community members afraid of taking action to stop these violations.

Additionally, with schools being closed, children spend long amounts of time unsupervised. This risk is also increased when children leave their houses to go to work, as they are exposed to sexual violence not only at their workplaces but also on the way to and from work, as some of them have to travel long distances. Furthermore, the high number of unaccompanied or separated children also contributes to the issue. While some children have lost their parents and caregivers, others are sent away by their own families, as it is the case with many children who are sent to more urban communities in hopes of escaping insecurity and having schooling opportunities. These children often stay with family members or acquaintances, and some are left to fend for themselves, all of which increases their risk of being exposed to sexual violence.

Finally, the needs created by the conflict are also a contributing factor, as some perpetrators take advantage of vulnerable people in need to sexually exploit them.

Since numerous and complex factors contribute to the threat of sexual violence, the responsibility for such acts cannot be attributed to a specific group of people. As seen in different situations, perpetrators are sometimes community members taking advantage of the situation. Other times, perpetrators are members of armed groups and sometimes, the perpetrators are children themselves. This illustrates the gravity of the situation in some areas of the conflict-affected regions.

#### **e) Children in conflict with the law.**

The increase in the number of children in conflict with the law was a recurrent complaint amongst community members. The conflict in the Northwest and Southwest Regions of Cameroons has brought about an increase in crime wave occurring even among children. This occurs mainly because schools for the most part were shut down in these regions and children especially young boys between the ages of 12-17 became idle at home and some went to join their peers selling in the markets and other activities. While they are carrying out these activities, they often find themselves in conflict with the law due to criminal activities they get involve in. A case in point is that of two minors between the ages of 12-14, who went fishing in water at the Bakassi Penninsula and got into a fight

with a man and ended up killing him. After this unfortunate incident, they tried to hide the corpse, but were discovered by community members who reported the matter to authorities and the children were then arrested and brought to Buea Central Prison where they were detained in pre-trial detention, with accusation for murdered.

Equally, hard drugs and powerful substances such as marijuana, “*Afofo*” (a locally brewed strong liquor), tramadol, and “*tailan*” (powdered substance like cocaine) are being sold to adolescents and their consumption is not restricted. Some clandestine business operators and NSAGs are the main suppliers of these drugs. This issue seems to be linked to other forms of delinquency, as community members report that children will steal money in order to buy drugs.

Apart from these, there has also been a rise in petty crimes amongst children in several of the hardest-hit communities. This issue exposes children to other protection risks such as physical abuse when children who are caught stealing are sometimes harshly punished by community members. On May 28, 2020, the Defence and Security forces rounded up a group of 7 boys smoking cannabis in an uncompleted building in Buea and opened fire, killing four and three escaped with bullet wounds. This attack follows the Bakweri town massacre of 31 July 2018 still in Buea in Fako Division of the Southwest Region, in which a group of boys were rounded up and shot dead by the Defence and Security Forces for smoking cannabis. Note should be taken that the cultivation of, marketing

and use of cannabis is restricted in Cameroon and the use of it by children there by puts them in conflict with the law when they are caught.

**f) Lack of Legal Documentation.**

One of the most highlighted issues affecting children in the conflict affected arears has been the lack of legal documentation. This problem is a complex one, as lack of legal documentation is a pre-existing structural issue in all of Cameroon, which has been aggravated by the crisis. There are multiple barriers to obtaining civil documentation. Difficulties accessing civil documentation services, and lack of knowledge amongst the population about the way in which these legal processes work and about the importance of registering births were an already existing problem before the crisis.

While the crisis in the Northwest and Southwest rages on, CHRDA has document a record of over 250 villages raided and burnt down by the Defence and Security Forces. The consequence of such burnings is the destruction of civilian property including their civil documentation. Community members reported that their homes were raided by the military and they escaped without taking any belongings, only to return and find out that their civil documents and certificates were destroyed because of arson. Two boys living with disabilities (blindness) in Kumbo, Bui Division of the Northwest Region reported that they could not register to seat for the General Certificate of Education in Cameroon

for the 2019/2020 session because their homes were raided and burnt and their documents destroyed.

However, the problem becomes even more complex in the context of the Anglophone crisis. This is because of the link between civil status documentation authority and the state. This makes it a sensitive issue to tackle, as it extends beyond state actors. Protection partners have also raised concerns on assisting with the provision of civil documentation due to the security risks that may arise from engaging with government agencies and the perception of support for the government that this might give to the NSAGs.

Consequently, hundreds of undocumented children are born in the NW/SW region every month. For example, only in March 2021, assessments carried out by protection partners in the Meme and Manyu divisions (SW) revealed there were at least 310 children without birth certificates. This exposes children to further protection risks such as statelessness, arbitrary arrests, and it precludes them from completing school, which in turn exposes them to increased risks of child labour and exploitation. In line with this, arbitrary arrest has been one of the highest protection incidents affecting men.

Those who do not have ID cards are arrested on basis of their suspected affiliation with NSAGs. Equally, because people cannot cross check points without ID cards, those without ID cards are labelled as people

who are staying in the bush and preventing the crisis from ending. Those without documentation are also threatened with imprisonment and money extorted from them. Similarly, many of the children who are reportedly engaged in in child labour are also found to be undocumented.

#### **4. HOW TO PROTECT CHILDREN AFFECTED BY CONFLICT IN CAMEROON.**

During an armed conflict, there is always the need to protect children because they constitute one of the most vulnerable groups in a conflict situation. There is therefore a need to develop mechanisms geared towards ensuring the proper protections of children in an armed conflict. Some of these mechanisms will include the following;

##### **a) Preventing the recruitment of children into armed groups.**

One of the best and preventive measure to ensure the protection of children inn armed conflict is to prevent them from being recruited into armed groups. Children should not for any reason be used by combatants in an armed conflict. This can be achieved through the financing of projects aimed at sensitizing actors in a conflict on both the dangers and the legal implications of recruiting children into armed forces.

According to the Paris Principles and Commitments on Children Associated with Armed Conflict, there are a series of measures that must be taken in order to prevent the unlawful recruitment and use of children in armed conflict. These measures include the following:

- Conducting information campaigns for armed forces and armed groups.

- Supporting alternatives to child association, such as education and vocational training.
- Preventing family separation.
- Supporting conflict reduction in local communities.
- Criminalizing child recruitment in domestic law.
- Increasing community awareness on risk factors for child association.
- Raising awareness of differentiated risks and the needs of children based on gender analysis.

**b) Creation of safe spaces to harbour children during armed conflicts.**

In order to avoid the devastating effects of armed conflicts on children, mechanisms should be put in place to ensure the creation of safe spaces like schools, vocational training centres and other facilities in order to ensure that children are not exposed to violence. Creation of demobilisation and re-integration centres to attain to the needs of children formally exposed violence.



### **c) Reintegration**

In order to ensure the return to normal life for children formerly exposed to armed conflicts, demobilisation and reintegration centres should be created and equipped with the necessary facilities to reintegrate ex-child soldiers to normal life

The Paris Principles and Commitments on Children Associated with Armed Conflict recommend the following to ensure effective reintegration:

- Adopting an Inclusive approach and prioritizing family reunion
- Providing full support to ensure effective reintegration of children into civil life

### **d) Advocacy**

Advocacy to ensure the adoption of policies at the international, regional and local levels aimed at protecting children during armed conflict. This advocacy should be geared towards encouraging governments to ratify conventions aimed at child protection and to enact local legislation, which are in conformity with international standards of protection of children affected by conflict.

### **e) Protecting Humanitarian Workers**

Ensuring the protection of humanitarian workers who are involved in providing supplies to children affected by conflict. Combatants should be schooled on the importance of creating safe corridors for food and medical supplies to reach the children especially those ones in the highly enclaved areas. This will help prevent malnutrition and illnesses, which constitutes one of the major causes of death during armed conflict especially in children.

## **5. QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON THE RECRUITMENT AND USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS.**

This Q&A was curled from the website of the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict. It provides an in-depth look into the problem of child soldering around the world.

### **a) How many child soldiers are there in the world?**

Tens of thousands of boys and girls are recruited and used as child soldiers by armed forces and armed groups in conflict in over 20 countries around the word. According to a report from Save the Children (2020), many children are at risk of being recruited into armed groups and government forces worldwide. Also, an estimate of over 200 million children are living in the world's most lethal war zones, hence, prone to being recruited as child soldiers.

It is difficult to know the exact number of children associated with armed groups around the world. However, according to Save the Children, between 2005 and 2018, a total of over 60,000 children are verified to have been recruited and used by armed groups, but these numbers are likely to be higher now considering the increase in the number of armed conflicts all over the world in recent years.

## **b) What is it like to be a child soldier?**

There are many ways for children to become associated with armed forces and groups. Some children are abducted and beaten into submission; others join military groups to escape poverty, to defend their communities, out of a feeling of revenge or for other reasons. Their tasks can vary, from combatants to cooks, spies, messengers and even sex slaves. Each year, the UN receives reports of children being associated with armed groups.

No matter their role, child soldiers are exposed to acute levels of violence – as witnesses, direct victims and forced participants. Some are injured and have to live with disabilities for the rest of their lives because of their mental and physical vulnerability.

More often, children are recruited into armed groups in order to be used as human shields. This is because these armed groups do believe that the enemy party will not likely shoot at children because of their ages. This in effect is never the case as many child soldiers are killed during armed conflicts.

Girls are also recruited and used by armed forces and groups. They have vulnerabilities unique to their gender and place in society and suffer specific consequences including, but not limited to, rape and sexual violence, pregnancy and pregnancy-related complications, stigma and rejection by families and communities

### **c) Are current conflicts affecting children differently?**

Children have become more vulnerable due to new tactics of warfare, the absence of clear battlefields, the use of tactics of extreme violence, the increasing number and diversity of armed groups that add to the complexity of conflicts and the deliberate targeting of traditional safe havens such as schools and hospitals.

Of growing concern is the use of children to carry or plant explosive devices. In the past few years, we have witnessed an increase in the use of child suicide bombers. The Boko Haram terrorist group has been noted for using child soldiers to carry out their numerous suicide bombings.

The detention of children is another concern. They can be detained because of their alleged association with an armed group, or because they have allegedly participated in hostilities. Instead of being considered victims of the adults who recruited them, children are considered security threats. When children are arrested, they are often detained without due process, for long periods of time and in contravention of international standards applicable to juvenile justice.

### **d) What happens to child soldiers after their release?**

Reintegration is an essential part of the work to help child soldiers rebuild their lives. Within the UN system, UNICEF is in charge of the reintegration of former child soldiers and their first priority is to prepare

them for a return to civilian life. Psychosocial support, education and/or training are important aspects of the reintegration programs. Attempting to reunite children with their families and communities are also essential, but sensitization and reconciliation efforts are sometimes necessary before a child is welcomed back at home.

The reintegration of former child soldiers is a long process and the Special Representative has launched together with UNICEF the Global Coalition for Reintegration of Child Soldiers in September 2018. The initiative aims to bring attention to the issue of reintegration of former child soldiers and encourage action to sustainably address support for child reintegration programs. By helping children deeply affected by conflict, we contribute to building a peaceful future for their country.

e) What can we do to end the recruitment and use of child soldiers?



Over the past 20 years, the world has come together to denounce and take action against the recruitment and use of children in conflict. The mandate of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict was created in 1996 by the UN General Assembly following the publication of Graca Machel's report titled the "**Impact of Armed Conflict on Children**". The report highlighted the disproportionate impact of war on boys and girls and identified them as the primary victims of armed conflict.

Since then, the protection of children has been firmly placed on the agenda of the United Nations highest bodies, and countries around the world have become involved and strong supporters of measures to improve the protection of children affected by war.

The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, adopted in 2000, is another important tool to end the recruitment and use of child soldiers. The protocol, now ratified by a majority of the world's countries, establishes the minimum age for recruitment in conflict at 18.

Constant advocacy and education of conflicting parties (combatants) in the different armed conflicts on the need to avoid the recruitment of children into armed groups is also essential. This is because sensitization will help to create awareness on the sanctions awaiting those who recruit children illegally into armed conflicts.



## **6. INTERNATIONAL JURISPRUDENCE ON CHILD SOLDIERING.**

The issue of recruitment and use of children as child soldiers has been handled expeditiously by international courts as well as international tribunals. The most prominent court that handles issues of such magnitude indicting individuals as well as groups is the International Criminal Court. As concerns International Tribunals, the Special Tribunal for Sierra Leon is one of the most prominent international tribunals that has prosecuted issues of recruitment and use of children in armed conflict which is considered a war crime. These cases are put here as a reminder to the combatants and the general public that, someday, there will be prosecution of persons recruiting children in armed conflict. These cases are a demonstration of the fact that justice will be served. Some cases of prosecution such crimes will be considered below.

### ***a) The Lubanga Case before the ICC. (Prosecutor v. Thomas Dyilo Lubanga. (Trial Chamber Judgement).***

This case is on war crimes that were committed in the DRC by Mr Lubanga. On March 2012, the International Criminal Court (ICC) convicted Lubanga Dyilo of committing war crimes consisting of the enlisting and conscription of children under the age of 15 into the *Forces Patriotiques pour La Liberations du Congo* and their use for active participation in hostilities. He was sentenced by the ICC to a total of 14

years of imprisonment. The Lubanga case was the first of its kind before the ICC. Of great significance was the courts acceptance that the line between voluntary and involuntary recruitment is legally irrelevant in the context of children's association with armed forces or armed groups in the times of conflict. The court also decided to apply the broad interpretation of the term "active participation in hostilities" to ensure justice and protection for all children associated with armed conflicts from those on the front line to the boys and girls who were involved in multiple roles in supporting the combatants.

***b) The Prosecutor v. Bosco Ntaganda.***

Another land mark case heard at the ICC was the case against Bosco Ntaganda. He was charged with thirteen counts which included war crimes as well crimes against humanity in luring, conscription and enlistment of children into armed group and using them to actively take part in hostilities. These crimes were committed in the DRC by the "Forces Patritiques pour la Liberations du Congo" which Mr. Bosco had acted as Deputy Chief of Staff and commander of the said armed group. He was issued a warrant of arrest on 13 July 2012 and he later voluntarily surrendered to the ICC's custody on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2013. The Trial began on 2 November 2015 and the closing statements heard on the 28-30 August. 2018. He was later found guilty of a series of charges including the illegal conscription and enlistment of Children below 15 years into an armed group on the 8 July 2019. He was sentenced to 30 years

imprisonment on the 7<sup>th</sup> November 2019. He was also asked to pay reparations to the victims of his acts worth USD 30.000.000. The verdict and sentence was later confirmed in appeals on the 30 March 2021 by the ICC Appeals Chamber.

***c) The Prosecutor v. Dominic Ongwen.***

Dominic Ongwen, former commander of the Sinia Brigade of the Lord's Resistant Army (LRA) was also prosecuted by the ICC for committing crimes characterized as war crimes as well as crimes against humanity amongst which was conscription of children under the age of 15 into the Sinia Brigade and using them to participate actively in hostilities. These crimes were committed in Northern Uganda between 1 July 2002 and 31 December 2005. In May 2005, the Prosecutor at the ICC submitted for the issue of a warrant of against Joseph Koni, Vincent Otti, Raska Lukwiya, Okot Odhiambo and Dominic Ongwen for alleged war crimes and crimes and crimes against humanity committed by them and requested the Republic of Uganda to search, arrest and surrender to the court the suspects mentioned above. The case of Dominic Ongwen will later be severed from the original case between *The Prosecutor v. Joseph Kony, Vincent Otti, Raska Lukwiya, Okot Adhiambo and Domimic Ongwen* on 6<sup>th</sup> July 2015 due to failure to arrest the other suspects. On the 21 January 2015, Dominic Ongwen was transferred to the ICC Detention Centre in The Hague (Netherlands). His initial appearance before the single judge of Pre-Trial Chamber took place on 26 January

2015. After a long trial, the Trial Chamber IX on the 4 May 2021 found Dominic Ongwen Guilty of a total of 61 crimes comprising crimes and humanity and war crimes amongst which was the crime of Conscription of children under the age of 15 into the Sinia Brigade and using them to participate actively in hostilities. On 6 May 2021, Trial Chamber IX sentenced Dominic Ongwen to 25 years Imprisonment.

*d) The Charles Taylor case before the Special Court for Sierra Leone.*

The Charles Taylor case is one of the major cases decided by the Special Tribunal for Sierra Leone (SCSL). On 26 April 2012, the SCSL found former President of Liberia, Charles Taylor, guilty of aiding and abetting war crimes committed by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) during the 1991-2002 civil war in Sierra Leone. The Special Court sentenced Taylor to 50 years in prison and this sentence was upheld by the Appeal Chamber in September 2013. The court's judgement against Charles Taylor marked the first time that a former Head of State has been convicted for war crimes that were committed by an armed group found not be under his direct command and control but to which he gave his practical assistance, encouragement and moral support. The Special court was also the first international court to determine the recruitment and use of children aged less than 15 years constituted a war crime under customary international law.

## **7. SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS: HOW TO PREVENT THE RECRUITMENT OF CHILD SOLDIERS IN CAMEROON.**

Child soldiers live in a grim world that largely exists outside of international and national laws. Because the actions required to prevent child soldier recruitment are diverse, prevention policies should include a variety of inter-sectoral and integrated approaches, including especially services for education and training in the broadest and most flexible sense. We therefore recommend the following as possible ways to prevent the recruitment of children into armed conflict in Cameroon:

### **a) Comprehensive Education Reform for Improved Access, Equity and Quality**

A national policy for educational reform should be developed to improve fragile and failing education systems, with special attention to regions where children could be conscripted into armed groups. Both formal education and non-formal education systems should be addressed through the development of partnerships among institutions of civil society and the public and private sectors. Leaders of indoctrination movements in school and non-formal education settings should be identified and restrained, if not removed, from guiding children's learning. Curriculum, materials, methods and teacher training systems should be revised and changed as rapidly as possible. As specified in the **1960 UNESCO**

**Convention against Discrimination in Education and the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education of 1994**, priority attention should be given to safeguarding ethnic and linguistic educational rights, as well as to providing enriched learning opportunities for children with developmental delays and disabilities.

**b) Policy for Integrated Educational, Trauma Healing and Protective Services.**

For children buffeted by domestic, community or inter-generational violence, services that integrate educational, trauma healing and protective activities are required – but seldom made available. Trauma healing services may be provided during or after conflicts, but almost always, they are short-term and not integrated into longer-term education and protective services. Policies for trauma healing can and should be included in policies and plans for education and protective services. They should provide for long-term, community-based trauma healing programs, with a special focus on the prevention of the conscription of children into armed conflict. The training of teachers and community facilitators in methods for conflict resolution, trauma healing and reconciliation should be given top priority, along with some other curricular contents. Protective social services should be made more available, especially for communities, schools and families with children

at high risk of being forced or enticed into armed groups. National Trauma Centres for Children Affected by Conflicts, including child soldiers, could be developed along the line of the many national and international Centres for the Victims of Torture.

**c) Pro-Active Community and IDP or Refugee Security Systems and Networks.**

Policies dealing with governance, community policing, justice systems and camps for IDPs or refugees should include provisions for ensuring greater security, with a special focus on preventing the conscription of child soldiers. Achvarina and Reich (2006) posit that the protection of children and youth in refugee camps in Africa explains the lower incidence of child soldiers in certain African countries, such as Senegal, Angola, Mali, Lesotho and Niger. Systems for training teachers, community leaders and organizations in primary security and reciprocal neighbourhood protection methods should be developed and supported, and police systems need to be reinforced to support community and neighbourhood security efforts. Above all, emphasis should be given to using and protecting schools and refugee or IDP camps as a “safe space” or “child friendly spaces” for children, teachers and parents. Building linkages between community and camp security structures and networks in many places would enable shared learning and the reinforcement of primary security measures.

#### **d) Use of Media to Prevent the Recruitment of Child Soldiers.**

A social communications policy should be developed in each country experiencing the recruitment of child soldiers to encourage all citizens to help with efforts to resist and stop recruitment. A public information campaign that presents key elements of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and international decisions of the International Criminal court should be combined with information on implementing legislation and policies in each nation. This type of activity could be initiated during the precursor phase but it is hard to attract media attention to this matter until actual recruitment of child soldiers occurs within a nation. Public information campaigns are essential in nations once violence has begun. Some nations, such as Colombia, have made extensive use of media messages (especially radio), pamphlets and commonly used items such as matchbooks to encourage adult guerrillas and paramilitaries to leave armed brigades. This approach has been very effective. Media usage has been instrumental in demobilization in Colombia, where over 32,000 paramilitaries and a large number of guerrillas defected during 2005 – 2006. The use of radio and visual print media could be considered for reaching child soldiers, many of whom are likely to be illiterate. If 25 children and youth can be enticed into leaving soon after they enter armed groups, then this “late prevention” work should help to keep them from becoming further radicalized and traumatized. Given children’s fears, in some situations it may be



necessary to place individuals “behind the lines” to contact child soldiers, convince them to leave, and help them reach safety. Media should also be used to help prepare the civilian population regarding ways to receive ex-child soldiers in a positive manner rather than reject them, as often happens.

#### **e) Policy for Long-Term Support.**

Many nations have looked for “quick fixes” to the “child soldier problem.” However, long-term follow-up and continued support services will be required to ensure ex-child soldiers and the children of ex-combatants are well integrated into society, receive nurturing care from their own or new families, continue their education and training, are provided trauma-healing services as needed, and are given security, especially from those who may wish to harm them. Also, the families and schools who receive them may need protection, monitoring to prevent the possible occurrence of indoctrination, and continued support services. Workforce training systems will be required with follow-up to ensure ex-child soldiers receive training and become gainfully employed or develop small businesses.

## Conclusion.

Mindful of these findings and recommendations, CHRDA concludes that children have been specifically affected by the violent crisis in Cameroon calls on all parties to the armed conflict to publicly engage in action plans to end crimes against children, to publicly condemn such acts and to urgently develop appropriate disciplinary and accountability mechanisms.

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i <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/where-we-work/cameroon/>

ii <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Secretary-General-Annual-Report-on-children-and-armed-conflict.pdf>, pages 30 and 31

iii <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/un-human-rights-council-49-uk-statement-under-item-2-general-debate>

iv [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un-geneva/hrc-49-eu-statement-general-debate-hc-oral-update\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un-geneva/hrc-49-eu-statement-general-debate-hc-oral-update_en)