

Cameroon

Chloe Siegel

The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) presents the following backgrounder on the humanitarian crises in Cameroon as of July 2021. Information and maps are from various sources and not the original work of USCRI.

Quick Overview

After many years of being considered one of Africa’s more peaceful countries, Cameroon is now struggling with the combined threats of a civil war in the south, terrorist attacks in the north, increasing political corruption, and the negative impacts of climate change. As a result, Cameroon is seeing high numbers of internally displaced persons within the country and an influx of English-speaking Cameroonians seeking asylum abroad. This backgrounder covers the history of Cameroon and the issues that have contributed to its many crises.

Detailed Advisory

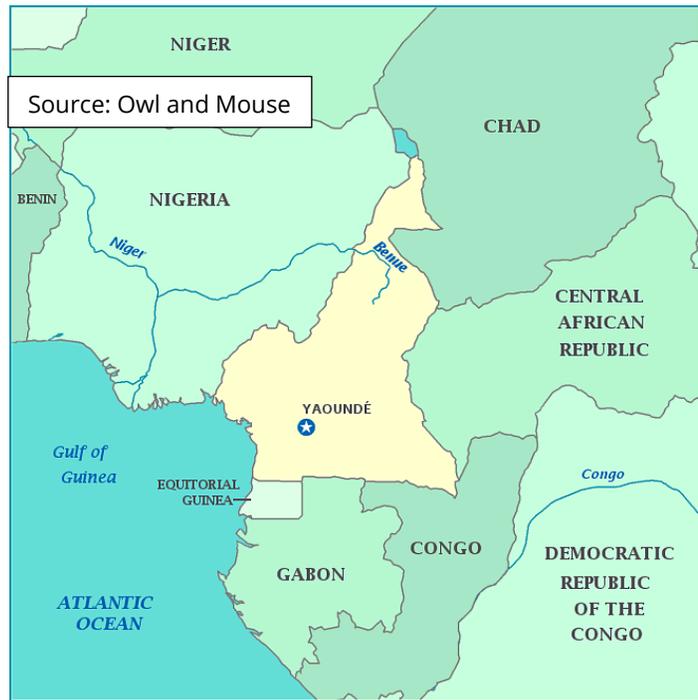
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WHO WE ARE

The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) is a nongovernmental, not-for-profit international organization that responds to the needs and advocates for the rights of refugees and immigrants worldwide.

Basic Information¹

Population: 27,157,413
Population growth rate: 2.59%
Population ages 0-14: 41.25%
Population ages 15-64: 55.2%
Population Rank: 52
Median age: 18.7 years
Growth rate: 2.62%
Life expectancy: 59 years
Fertility rate: 4.6 births/woman
Birth rate: 34.71 births/1,000 people
Death rate: 9.028 deaths/1,000 people



Demographics of Cameroon

Cameroon is an incredibly diverse country bordered by Nigeria, Chad, the Central African Republic, the Republic of Congo, Gabon, and Equatorial Guinea, with the Atlantic Ocean on the southwest border. While Cameroon is home to over 200 ethnic groups and 250 languages, there are three main native linguistic groups, including Bantu languages in the south, Sudanic languages in the north, and Semi-Bantu languages in the west.² Cameroon's official languages are French and English, a product of colonization by France and Britain. The majority of the population is Christian, with 38.3% identifying as Roman Catholic and 25.5% identifying as Protestant, and 24.4% identifying as Muslim, with a vast majority being Sunni. About 5% of the population identifies as either animist, other, or not religious.³

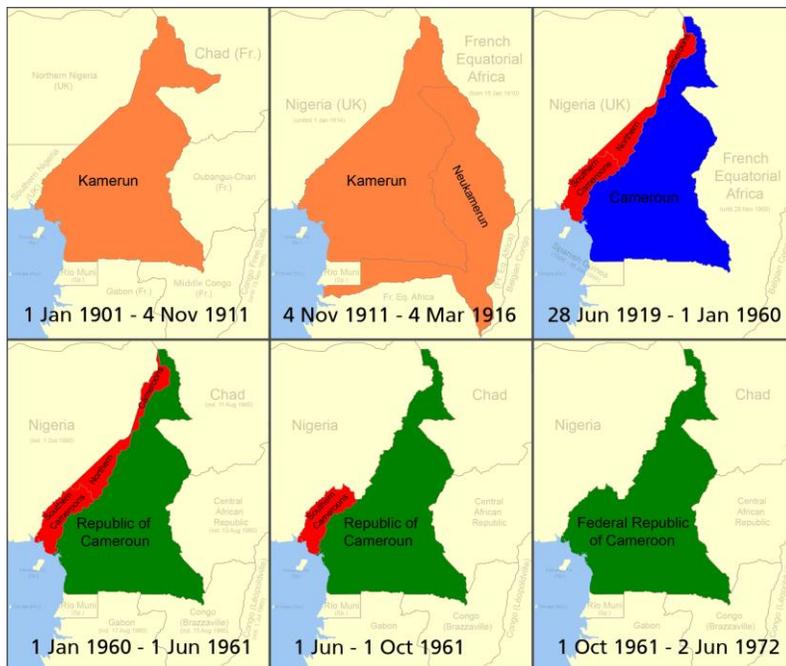
Over half of Cameroon's population lives in urban areas with the highest population density along the coasts, as well as along the northern and southern borders. The two largest cities include Douala, where the country's main port is located, and Yaoundé, the capital and important transportation hub.⁴ Cameroon's population is also fairly young, with over two-fifths of the population under 15 years of age and over two-thirds of the population under 30 years of age.⁵ While Cameroon's birth and death rates are below the regional average, life expectancy is above the regional average. However, the population growth rate is comparable to the regional average, which is still higher than most of the world.

History of Cameroon

Pre-Independence

Commonly referred to as “Africa in miniature” due to its vast geographical and cultural diversity,⁶ Cameroon is located at the junction of western and central Africa. Its name comes from Portuguese sailors who named the area “Rio dos Camarões” in the 15th century, or River of Prawns in English.⁷ The Bambenga Pygmies, an ethnic group of hunter gatherers, are the oldest known inhabitants.⁸ The northern provinces were established by Fulani soldiers, while the western areas were controlled by powerful “fondoms,” or Cameroonian kingdoms.⁹ In 1884, Germany colonized the territory, as well as

some parts of the Central African Republic, Congo, Gabon, Chad, and Nigeria, naming the consolidated area Kamerun.¹⁰ The land was then divided into French and British colonies in 1919 as League of Nations Mandate territories, after Germany’s defeat in World War I. British Cameroon gained independence from Britain in 1960, shortly after French Cameroun gained its independence from France.¹¹ The two former colonies joined together to become the Federal Republic of Cameroon on October 1, 1961, a day that still serves as a public holiday known as Unification Day.¹²



Post-Independence

The federal system of government established in the newly independent state was abandoned in 1972 after a referendum, and the United Republic of Cameroon was created. President Ahmadou Ahidjo, who had led the country since independence from France in 1960, continued to consolidate power after the referendum as Cameroon became a one-party state. Ruling as an authoritarian leader, President Ahidjo transitioned Cameroon’s economic policy away from African socialism and towards an approach known as planned liberalism, a combination of capitalist and socialist strategies.¹³ Under this new policy, the country prioritized the regulation of natural resources, foreign investment into selective industries, and the diversification of cash crops, leading to a period of steady growth in the years following independence.¹⁴ This growth was undermined by widespread corruption that stemmed from President Ahidjo’s largely unqualified government appointees, eventually resulting in an economic crisis in the mid 1980s.¹⁵

Paul Biya took over as president as the constitutional successor on November 4, 1982, after President Ahidjo stepped down. Shortly after Biya took power, his government experienced a failed coup in response to his attempts to transition Cameroon towards a more democratic government.¹⁶ Following the coup, Biya abandoned these attempts and adopted a more autocratic leadership style. The failed economic policy of President Biya's predecessor in conjunction with falling prices of exports (mainly petroleum, cocoa, and coffee), led the country into a protracted recession in the 1990s.¹⁷ The country was eventually forced to turn to foreign aid in the form of International Monetary Fund (IMF) structural adjustment programs, as well as industry privatization.¹⁸

President Biya continued to resist both international and domestic calls to democratize the country throughout the recession. Even after multiparty politics was reintroduced, the president's CPDM party retained most of the power and Biya was reelected in 1992, 1997, and 2004.¹⁹ During this time, tensions formed between the Anglophone areas of the country and the French-speaking majority. The English-speaking minority claimed that they were facing mistreatment by Biya's government, including political exclusion, economic exploitation, and cultural assimilation, and some even began calling for secession. Today, there are clear divisions between people from the formerly British territory and people from the formerly French territory. The predominantly Muslim northern region of the former British colony is largely made up of vast savanna plateaus that are home to nomadic Sudanic and Arab pastoralists.²⁰ The southern regions are home to Bantu agriculturalists who have settled in permanent villages and mostly practice Christianity and some traditional African religions.²¹

Cameroon was also embroiled in long-standing border clashes with Nigeria for many years over the Bakassi Peninsula, a peninsula on the Gulf of Guinea that has rich oil reserves. The International Court of Justice transferred control of the territory from Nigeria to Cameroon in 2002.²² The transfer was marred by civil unrest and dissatisfaction by many residents of the peninsula, who preferred to keep their Nigerian identity. The border dispute provoked a local separatist insurgency by those who refused to accept Cameroonian rule. Despite opposition, the transfer of the Bakassi Peninsula to Cameroon was completed on August 14, 2008.²³



Current Situation

The current government operates as a unitary presidential republic run by the dominant political party, in which the president has the power to appoint a prime minister and cabinet. There is also a bicameral parliament in which all members serve five-year terms. Cameroon is made up of ten administrative regions, each represented by 10 senators in parliament.

President Biya holds most of the power in the country and is able to heavily influence judicial appointments. Biya also serves as both the chief of state and head of the armed forces. In 2008, presidential term limits were eliminated through a constitutional amendment that also “granted immunity to the country’s president for any acts committed in an official capacity during the president’s time in office.”²⁴

After presidential term limits were eliminated in 2008, President Biya was able to run again in 2011 in an election largely characterized by political distrust and corruption. The Cameroonian Supreme Court dismissed any lawsuits claiming election fraud, and Biya won with 77% of the vote.²⁵ Biya’s power was further consolidated after the 100-member Senate was created in 2013, where his party controlled 86 of the 100 seats. His Cameroon People’s Democratic Movement (CPDM) party won even more seats in the 2018 elections, and an absolute majority in the 2020 legislative election.²⁶

In 2014, President Biya sent troops to the Nigerian border and declared war against Boko Haram, a terrorist group that had been engaging in kidnappings and regular attacks inside Cameroon’s borders.²⁷ Cameroon’s military finally claimed victory over Boko Haram within the country in September of 2018, after forming a multinational coalition with the militaries of some nearby countries.²⁸ However, only a couple of years later, the group reignited its attacks in the country, with “Cameroon’s Far North region increasingly becom[ing] the epicenter of Boko Haram’s violence.”²⁹ The region continues to struggle with intermittent attacks, with a large portion of the country’s displaced population a direct result of the instability caused by Boko Haram.

Additionally, since 2016, tensions have been escalating in Cameroon’s southwestern regions between the Anglophone population and the Francophone central government. This conflict is known as the Anglophone Crisis. English-speaking communities began regularly protesting marginalization by the government and the erosion of Anglophone culture that began when President Biya took office, replacing English with French as the official language in schools and government systems.³⁰ Biya’s government responded to these demonstrations by jailing, and even killing, protesters. While some people in the region advocated for a return to a federal style government that existed after independence, “one in which they felt power between the Anglophone and Francophone populations was more equitably shared,” others preferred a total secession from Cameroon.³¹ In 2017, separatists began fighting for independence of all Anglophone areas, calling them the Federal Republic of Ambazonia and marking the beginning of a guerilla war against government forces.



In response, the government launched a military offensive as the insurgency spread further across the Anglophone regions in the Northwest and Southwest regions. In the midst of the conflict, President Biya won a seventh term on October 7, 2018, in elections marred by voter disenfranchisement of those living in the Anglophone regions.³² Despite legal challenges filed by opposition groups, Biya was declared to have officially won 71% of the vote. Unable to tackle multiple conflicts at once, the government redirected troops that were battling Boko Haram in the north to concentrate on fighting the Ambazonian separatists, leaving the north more open to terrorist attacks that have been on the rise in recent months.³³

Both sides of the conflict have been accused of committing human rights violations. There have been several reports of civilians getting killed or injured in the crossfire between the separatists and government forces. The guerilla campaign and government response have also led to many villages being burned down and have displaced hundreds of thousands of people from the area.³⁴

There have been few attempts to negotiate an end to the conflict. In 2019, Switzerland mediated talks between the Ambazonian nationalists and the central government, but the talks were not successful. International pressure has grown for a ceasefire in the contested area, and representatives of both sides held talks again in July of 2020.³⁵ The separatists' demands included government forces pulling out of the Anglophone regions and amnesty for individuals in the separatist group.³⁶ These talks also ultimately failed—largely due to divisions within the separatist group—with some wanting to pursue a negotiated ceasefire and others opposing negotiations altogether.³⁷

Current Issues

Displacement

The ongoing violence has killed at least 4,000 and displaced over 750,000 people who now live as either internally displaced persons (IDPs) or refugees in neighboring countries.³⁸ The Cameroonian army is burning civilian homes and villages as a counterinsurgency tactic, forcing entire families to flee into the jungle, some hiding for months at a time, in search of shelter and safety.³⁹ While historically most of the displacement in Cameroon has been caused by terrorism in the north, in 2020, seven in ten IDPs in Cameroon were displaced due to the Anglophone Crisis. The combination of violent attacks by Boko Haram in the Far North, and the conflict over Ambazonia in the Northwest and Southwest regions, “continue[s] to trigger massive but underreported displacement in Cameroon.”⁴⁰ According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC), the total number of new displacements almost doubled in Cameroon from 2019 to 2020, bringing the total number of internally displaced persons in the country, including those who were displaced before the conflict, to over one million. On top of this, Cameroon hosts about 435,000 refugees from Nigeria and the Central African Republic, spreading thin the already limited resources in host areas.⁴¹

Food and Water Insecurity

Violence and conflict, along with the COVID-19 pandemic, have negatively impacted nutrition services in the country. Almost 2.3 million people are projected to face food insecurity from June to August of 2021.⁴² Many displaced people have become food insecure as a result of loss of land or livestock when they were forced to flee, and violence and natural disasters have disrupted food markets in many areas. Access to safe drinking water is also a challenge, with 44% of the displaced population in the Far North reporting access to “potable water” as a priority need over both food and healthcare.⁴³ Without access to clean water, people must resort to using water from dirty streams, rivers, and unprotected wells, which has led to spikes in some diseases and has made it more difficult for women and girls to maintain good menstrual hygiene. 54% of Cameroonians collect water from “an unimproved water source,” such as lakes, as opposed to wells or other sources purposely designed for human consumption.

Humanitarian Assistance

The high levels of displacement triggered by terrorism and conflict, the protracted crises in neighboring Nigeria and the Central African Republic, are intensifying humanitarian needs for the people in Cameroon. As of April 22, 2020, 3.9 million people were in need of emergency assistance, and as many as 4.4 million people are projected to be in need of humanitarian assistance throughout 2021.⁴⁴ The main challenges of delivering aid include limited access to conflict areas, civil unrest, poor infrastructure, and restrictions on the movement of aid organizations. In addition, humanitarian response in Cameroon is chronically underfunded.

Press freedom

Being a journalist has become extremely dangerous in Cameroon during the Anglophone Crisis. Journalists are denied access to conflict areas and often targeted by the government under accusations of spreading propaganda. Many are taken as prisoners of war and kept in prisons with extremely poor conditions.⁴⁵

Education

The Ambazonia separatist group has heavily targeted schools in its insurgency, burning or attacking those that have not closed down. The group announced a total boycott of schools at the end of 2017 that led to more than 80 percent of schools being forced to shut down in the Anglophone region, affecting the education of over 855,000 children.⁴⁶

Terrorism

Boko Haram has been increasing its attacks in the Far North region since the end of last year, looting homes and displacing families along the way. Cameroon is the second-most affected country by the Lake Chad Basin crisis, a conflict between several non-state armed groups and military forces in the Lake Chad region, after Nigeria.⁴⁷ Terrorist violence in Cameroon has led to the internal displacement

of about 322,000 people as of March 2021 while violence in neighboring Nigeria has driven 124,000 Nigerian refugees into the Far North region.⁴⁸

Women and Children

Of the 4.4 million people in need of humanitarian assistance in Cameroon, 1.6 million are children under the age of eighteen.⁴⁹ A majority of those displaced in 2020 are women and children, including many unaccompanied and separated children. The intentional attacks on schools in the Anglophone region have “forced many families to send their children to the Littoral, West, and Centre regions where they can pursue their education.”⁵⁰ The influx of displaced persons in the last year has put a strain on the limited basic resources and services that cater to women and children, such as neonatal care, education programs, health services for pregnant women, and private and safe washing facilities for menstrual hygiene management. Since the start of the Anglophone Crisis in the Northwest and Southwest regions, there has been an increase in both maternal and infant mortality rates.⁵¹ Women and girls are also facing a heightened risk of sexual and intimate partner violence and exploitation as a result of displacement, and sexually transmitted diseases have been on the rise in some regions “due to the increase of survival sex.”⁵² Young girls are more vulnerable to early marriage and unwanted pregnancies, and young boys are more vulnerable to recruitment in extremist groups.

Government Corruption

Government corruption has been rising in Cameroon since independence, affecting all branches of the government and the private sector. In 2020, Cameroon ranked 149th out of 179 countries on the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), which cited the police as the most corrupt institution according to Cameroonians.⁵³ The CPI also found that 72% of Cameroonians thought corruption increased in the previous 12 months and that 48% of public service users paid a bribe in the previous 12 months. The country has faced a severe lack of political will to prevent corruption, which can be tied to a history of President Biya’s government engaging in neopatrimonialism in order to control the different branches of government and prevent any chance of rebellion.

Climate Change

Cameroon’s population has been suffering simultaneously from the negative effects of climate change. Almost 5,000 people were displaced in Douala in August 2020 in “the worst coastal flooding in decades.”⁵⁴ Natural disasters also contribute to protracted and cyclical displacement, as flooding in the Far North region last year forced people who had already been displaced by conflict and violence to flee again.

COVID-19

As of June 24, 2021, Cameroon has reported 80,487 cases and 1,320 deaths from COVID-19. The population has shown a substantial amount of vaccine hesitancy with many citing worries about its reliability as their main concern.⁵⁵ An Enlarged Programme for Immunization (EPI) survey reported

that 37% of doctors and medical staff in the country were not willing to receive the vaccine. The lack of government outreach and communication about the vaccine and its safety has contributed to the government's poor mobilization strategy.

Looking to the Future

The Ambazonian separatist group has continued to conduct attacks throughout 2021, relying heavily on improvised explosive devices (IEDs). The Anglophone Conflict, which is also sometimes referred to as the Ambazonia War or the Cameroonian Civil War, has not been well-covered by international news, and many people outside of the region have never heard of it. According to the Head of Office of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) for Cameroon, Carla Martinez, "There is a complete lack of visibility of the crisis."⁵⁶ There is also a lack of humanitarian aid and medical facilities for those affected by the crisis. As of today, there does not appear to be a resolution to the war as the government continues to mount a counterinsurgency against the separatists while simultaneously fighting off Boko Haram in the north. While the government has deployed thousands of soldiers to the region, it is not nearly enough to prevent attacks and protect civilians living in the area. With the Cameroonian military stretched so thinly, it is unlikely that the country will be able to resolve either conflict without international aid and support.

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