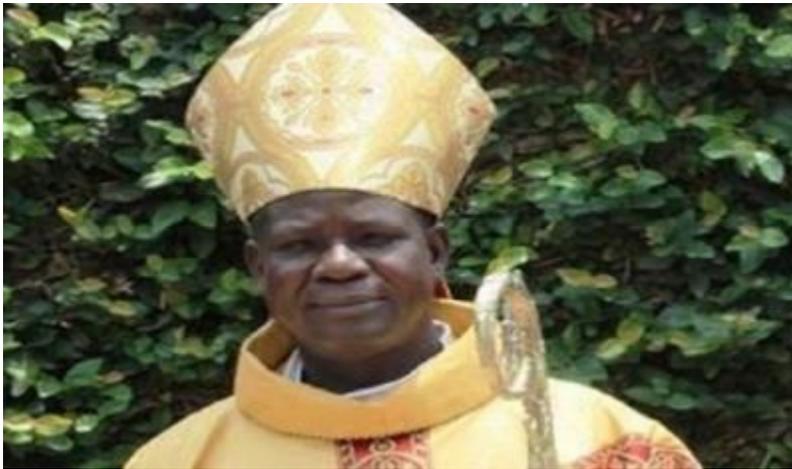


Catholics in the firing line in Cameroon, as Mass Exodus continues

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Archbishop Samuel Kleda

By: Rebecca Tinsley

As Cameroon marks its national day on 20 May, violence continues to escalate, literally putting Catholics in the firing line. Last week, the president of the Bishops' Conference, Archbishop Samuel Kleda, escaped what local media describes as an assassination attempt. Shots were fired at his residence after he criticised Cameroon's leader, Paul Biya, for his failure to broker genuine dialogue between the country's rival Anglophone groups and the Francophone-dominated government.

The attack comes after two years of increasing conflict which has prompted an estimated 160,000 English-speaking Cameroonians to flee to neighbouring Nigeria for safety, according to the UN. There are multiple verifiable reports that Cameroonian security forces have beaten and tortured unarmed Anglophone civilians in public, as a warning to those campaigning for an independent English-speaking republic they call Ambazonia.

In uncompromising language, the Bishops' Conference website accuses the security forces of rounding up English-speaking young men, shooting them and dumping them in public squares. L'Effort Camerounais maintains the government is "in denial," despite the scale of military atrocities, the looting of shops by soldiers, and the collective punishment being imposed on Anglophone communities.

The central African nation's unrest is rooted in a flawed referendum that denied English-speakers the chance to form their own nation at the time of independence. Instead, they were forced to choose between joining Nigeria or French-speaking Cameroon. The ostensibly federal system of government soon eroded, handing power to the Francophone majority, and increasingly marginalising the Anglophones. For example, until recently, only one member of the 36-person cabinet was an Anglophone. Under pressure, Biya added a second English-speaker in March.

The secessionist campaign has gathered strength in the past two years, following attempts by the government to impose the French language, laws and schooling on English-speakers in the North West and South West regions. The International Crisis Group reported that Cameroonian security services responded to peaceful protests in October 2017 with disproportionate force, shooting worshippers as they emerged from church. Crisis Group's researcher, Richard Moncrief, told ICN that at least 100 civilians have been killed, while up to 40 government officials have died at the hands of separatist extremists. Anglophone sources claim the so-called Red Dragon secessionists have killed 5,000 soldiers, in response to the deaths of 55,000 civilians, figures dismissed by Moncrief.

Catholic-run schools in the English-speaking regions have also suffered as separatists urge parents to keep their children at home during Anglophone protests called Ghost Days. In one case, the Reverend Father William Neba, the principal of St Bede's school, was kidnapped, but later released. Other schools have been the victims of arson for refusing to join the Ghost Days. There are also reports that school attendance is falling, and in some rural areas, they have closed entirely.

At the same time, there are widespread and verifiable reports of Cameroonian soldiers systematically burning the homes of English speakers in a manner resembling ethnic cleansing. There has been a recent massive increase in the number of Cameroonians fleeing to Nigeria: as recently as

April, the UN estimated 21,000 had left, but on Wednesday the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs increased that figure to 160,000.

In December, while 47 secessionists leaders were meeting in Nigeria, they were apprehended and extradited to Cameroon, where they remain in prison and incommunicado. Evidently, they will be charged with terrorism offences, although they have not been allowed to see their lawyers or families. According to lawyer Nkongo Felix Agbor Balla, about 1,000 other Anglophone activists are being held on suspicion of "terrorist" offences.

Although Britain has historic ties with the English-speaking regions of its former colony, the UK has opted not to champion the cause of the Anglophone community. Answering a Parliamentary question on May 15th, the Foreign Office minister, Harriett Baldwin, said, "There is violence on all sides in Cameroon and we are extremely concerned about the situation." She added that the UK was encouraging "not only the government but all Cameroonians to participate in a process of inclusive dialogue."

The Anglophone Diaspora in the UK have reacted to the minister's response with frustration because the Foreign Office appears to be treating both sides as equally guilty of human rights abuses. "This is moral equivalency," said one leader who cannot be named for his own safety. "Only the government can initiate genuine dialogue, and only the government has helicopter gunships and thousands of troops menacing peaceful civilians. Only the government is forcing 160,000 people to flee. We call on the UK to pressure President Biya into convening meaningful and inclusive peace talks."

With no apparent irony, the Cameroonian authorities have announced that the theme of the country's national day, on May 20th, is as follows: "Cameroonian citizens, let us remain united in diversity and preserve social peace for a stable and prosperous Cameroon."

President Biya, age 85, has been in power since 1982. He is running for re-election in October, and he has ruled out discussion of Cameroon's territorial integrity. Meanwhile, most Francophone residents are said to be barely aware of the violence in the Anglophone regions. More media attention is given to the nation's battle against the Islamist jihadists Boko Haram in Cameroon's Far North region. It is thought that Biya's willingness to fight the Nigerian terrorists on behalf of the international community may be one reason the UK and France are reluctant to press his government to hold talks with Anglophone groups, including church representatives.