CRISIS DENIED IN CAMEROON

GOVERNMENT REFUSAL TO RECOGNIZE SUFFERING IN NWSW DETERS DONORS

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FIELD REPORT | MAY 2019
Cover Photo: In the South-West Region of Cameroon, a University student stands in the courtyard of the chemistry department. Photo by Alexis Huguet/AFP/Getty Images.
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SUMMARY

Cameroon has long been viewed as a model of stability in a region fraught with conflict. Under the surface, however, tensions between its Anglophone and Francophone populations have simmered for decades. The Anglophone minority, mostly concentrated in the North-West and South-West regions (NWSW), has been marginalized, discriminated against, and economically disenfranchised since a referendum ended federalism and joined the two populations in a full political union in 1972.

In late 2016, instability gave way to violence when protests against the government’s imposition of Francophone teachers and lawyers in Anglophone schools and courts were met with military action. The government’s reaction to the protests resulted in the formation of several non-state armed groups and fueled existing separatist sentiment. Armed groups enforced school boycotts, and the subsequent violent confrontations have forced more than half a million people to flee their homes. According to the UN, the conflict has left 1.3 million people in need of assistance.

Cameroonian authorities deny the severity of the displacement and humanitarian need. Making matters worse, both Cameroonian forces and non-state armed groups severely restrict freedom of movement, preventing local populations from accessing their land and basic services. Both also have taken steps to limit the access of humanitarian workers to populations affected by the conflict. However, through sustained engagement with local officials, communities, and armed groups, relief groups have been able to build trust and expand their reach into areas hit hard by the violence. Most of these groups have relied on their own internal funding, not specifically designated for the NWSW, to assess and serve the affected populations because international donors have yet to step up and engage in a meaningful way.

Instead, foreign donor governments and other international stakeholders have focused on supporting a peace process, which clearly deserves international engagement. However, it is unlikely to bear fruit in the near term because the parties involved refuse to engage in meaningful dialogue. This fact raises the question of why donors so far have refused to expand their engagement beyond the peace process to address the humanitarian consequences of the fighting. The humanitarian situation is deteriorating rapidly as aid organizations burn through the last of their resources.

To better understand the issues humanitarian actors face in the NWSW, a team from Refugees International traveled to Cameroon in March and April 2019. Refugees International found that access to affected communities remains a challenge for these organizations. Although aid groups can make changes to improve the effectiveness of their response, increased funding—and specifically, a more cooperative response from the national government—would change the humanitarian landscape most dramatically. Most important, international donor involvement would increase global attention to the crisis and allow UN agencies and humanitarian organizations to overcome obstacles to the humanitarian response and better protect the NWSW’s civilian population.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Government of Cameroon:

• Publicly recognize the severity of the crisis. Cameroonian authorities are responsible for addressing the needs of civilians. Their failure to recognize the extent of displacement and humanitarian need has direct implications for the well-being of people in the NWSW and contributes to the failure of the international community to support the response effectively.

To the Government of Cameroon and Armed Groups:

• Guarantee unrestricted access. The Government of Cameroon and non-state armed groups must ensure safe passage for civilians, health workers, humanitarian organizations, and the diplomatic community throughout the NWSW.

• Accept that humanitarian organizations must adhere to humanitarian principles. Cameroonian authorities and non-state armed groups must accept the adherence of international
nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), local groups, and UN agencies to the humanitarian principles of neutrality and independence. Aid groups need to have contact with all parties to the conflict to negotiate access and cannot side—or be seen to side—with any of the parties, including Cameroon’s military.

**To the International Community and Donor Institutions:**

- **Increase funding.** Donors cannot wait for things to deteriorate further. They must provide flexible funding to reach the $93.5 million the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimates is needed for a thorough response in the NWSW. This immediate action is critical to ensure those organizations that have been using their internal funds are not forced to abandon the populations they have increasingly been able to reach.
- **Echo calls for unrestricted humanitarian access.** The international diplomatic community in Yaoundé and political leaders in capitals worldwide must magnify the efforts of humanitarian organizations by echoing their requests for unfettered access to populations in need.

**To Humanitarian Organizations and UN Agencies in Cameroon:**

- **Train local NGOs on humanitarian principles and strengthen their implementing capacity.** The pre-existing network of local organizations has allowed humanitarian groups to build trust and gain access to populations throughout the NWSW. However, many of these groups have not been trained in humanitarian principles, resulting in occasional violations. It is vital that international humanitarian organizations and UN agencies provide local groups with training to ensure their compliance with humanitarian principles. They must also provide technical training to local actors working on protection issues to strengthen their ability to respond effectively.
- **Expand International NGO Safety Organization’s (INSO’s) operations into the NWSW regions.** INSO’s provision of real-time security incident alerts, strategic planning support, crisis assistance, and guidance on improving access is vital in enabling organizations to overcome security obstacles. Cameroonian authorities must permit expansion of their operations.
- **Establish an INGO Forum with donor support.** Many INGOs fear reprisals from the Cameroonian authorities for reporting on the crisis and the extensive needs of the affected population. Launching an INGO Forum, which could operate either from within or outside of Cameroon, would allow operational organizations to report collectively on the practical realities and challenges.
- **Uphold the “ground rules” for engagement and information sharing with Cameroonian authorities.** Together with OCHA, humanitarian organizations have drafted agreed-upon ground rules for effective and principled engagement with Cameroonian authorities. However, these rules have not been fully respected. Aid organizations must follow these guidelines to work alongside the Government of Cameroon and its armed forces. Given the significant impediments to access, doing so is vital to protect the already-limited humanitarian space.
To UN Leadership:

- **Establish full-time positions within UN agency offices in the NWSW.** Despite the ongoing crisis, which shows no signs of waning, UN staff has been appointed to the NWSW on a temporary basis only. UN agencies in these regions, especially OCHA and the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), should create permanent positions for staff in their offices in the main NWSW cities of Bamenda and Buea to ensure continuity and prepare for expanded operations, contingent on donor funding.

- **Increase the visibility of the crisis, mobilize donor support, and call for unfettered humanitarian access.** Severe underfunding, lack of international attention, and the stalemate between aid groups and Cameroonian authorities are crippling the humanitarian response. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres must plan a visit to Cameroon to engage with President Paul Biya on these crucial issues.

- **Launch country-based pooled funds for a more nimble humanitarian response in Cameroon.** With trend lines only worsening, international humanitarian organizations must explore longer-term funding options. With donor support, OCHA should begin putting in place the mechanisms needed to establish pooled funds in Cameroon. Such funds are flexible and not earmarked, allowing both local and international aid organizations to respond to the most pressing needs in a timely manner.
BACKGROUND

Despite Cameroon’s relative stability in a region fraught with conflict, tensions between its Anglophone and Francophone populations have been simmering for decades. Even though English is one of the country’s two official languages, Anglophone communities in Cameroon have been marginalized, discriminated against, and economically deprived since a referendum that joined the two Cameroons in 1972. The Anglophone minority now accounts for 20 percent of Cameroon’s 22 million citizens and is concentrated in the NWSW region.

Since the country’s independence from colonial powers in the 1960s, the NWSW has experienced political and social tensions, driven largely by grievances over the marginalization of the Anglophone population. In October 2016, instability gave way to violence when protests against the government’s imposition of Francophone teachers and lawyers in Anglophone schools and courts were met with military action. The reaction to the protests fueled already existing separatist sentiment and dozens of non-state armed groups formed to retaliate against Cameroonian security forces and institute and enforce school boycotts.

Both non-state armed groups and Cameroonian security forces have targeted the civilian population in Anglophone areas. Approximately 1,800 people have been killed since the escalation of the conflict. Cameroonian security forces have committed extrajudicial killings, made arbitrary arrests, tortured detainees, and set fire to numerous towns and villages. Non-state armed groups have burned down schools and enforced school boycotts, using kidnapping and assault to deter attendance.

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Displacement and Needs

The conflict has displaced large numbers of people and resulted in a significant humanitarian crisis. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the violence has left 1.3 million people in need of assistance. The UN estimates that the number of those internally displaced by the turmoil in the NWSW has steadily increased since May 2018, when 160,000 Cameroonians were first forced to flee. Current estimates of displacement within the Anglophone population in the NWSW now stand at more than 530,000 and continue to rise daily. It is estimated that 50 percent of

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5. “Cameroon Conflict: We Live in Fear in Bamenda.”
6. “Ambazonia: Justin Trudeau’s Biafra?”
10. OCHA, “Cameroon: North-West and South-West Crisis Situation Report No. 5 - As of 31 March 2019,” accessed May 18,
RESEARCH OVERVIEW

In March and April 2019, a Refugees International team traveled to Yaoundé, Cameroon for two weeks to research the state of the humanitarian response to the ongoing crisis in the North-West and South-West regions (NWSW). The team conducted more than 25 interviews, both in person and over the phone, with local and international nongovernmental organization (INGO) staff, UN officials, and international embassy representatives. Team members also requested to meet with Cameroonian authorities, but these queries went unanswered or were denied. Refugees International did not attempt to meet with displaced populations; they have been subjected to numerous humanitarian assessments over time but have received remarkably little aid, so the team was concerned that such interviews would both worsen assessment fatigue and create false expectations among those in dire need. Moreover, a 10-day lockdown in the NWSW kept the Refugees International team from visiting these regions.

Many IDPs and communities affected by the conflict have witnessed atrocities and are in need of psychosocial support. The UN estimates that more than 266,000 children need care after experiencing trauma, losing family members, engaging in the conflict, or finding themselves separated from their families. In addition, sexual and gender-based violence is common in the NWSW, where survivors need urgent medical care and psychosocial support.

The needs for shelter and non-food items are also extremely pressing. Many IDPs are living in makeshift shelters or repurposed agricultural facilities. These poor living conditions expose them to health issues such as malaria and respiratory disease, and the situation is expected to decline further with the upcoming rainy season. Many IDPs who have

internally displaced persons (IDPs) fled from their towns and villages into rural areas in the bush or forest. Others have found shelter in host communities; many are living in overcrowded conditions in need of basic hygiene and domestic items.

Because of the continuing conflict, violence against and abuse of the civilian population are the most pressing concerns for the people in affected areas. The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has documented widespread protection issues and human rights violations, including the burning of property, kidnapping, rape and sexual assault, child labor and abuse, and illegal arrests. Women, children, and people with disabilities reported the highest numbers of protection concerns.

11. “Cameroon: North-West and South-West Crisis Situation Report No. 5.”
14. “Cameroon: North-West and South-West Crisis Situation Report No. 5.”
found shelter in host communities experience overcrowding that presents increased protection and health issues.

The majority of the displaced population previously relied on agriculture or raising livestock for both food and income. Forced to flee their villages, they now lack access to fields and markets.\(^\text{16}\) This circumstance has increased the threat of food insecurity for IDPs in the NWSW. According to OCHA, 1.5 million people in the region are food insecure.\(^\text{17}\)

Warring parties have hindered service provision by targeting and destroying education and health facilities.

Although the NWSW was a relatively well-developed region of the country, ongoing fighting is quickly eroding existing infrastructure. Since the onset of clashes, separatists have enforced school boycotts. Warring parties have hindered service provision by targeting and destroying education and health facilities. Humanitarian actors on the ground estimate that 4,400 schools—85 percent of the total number of schools in the NWSW—have been closed.\(^\text{18}\) As a result, more than 80 percent of school-aged children no longer have access to education.\(^\text{19}\)

Cameroon is currently grappling with the fallout of both regional and internal crises that have left 4.3 million people in need within its borders,\(^\text{20}\) including both refugees and IDPs. For years, it has welcomed refugees fleeing conflict in neighboring countries. Cameroon currently hosts more than 350,000 refugees and asylum seekers from the Central African Republic and 90,000 from Nigeria. It is also engaged in the fight against Boko Haram in its Extreme North Region.\(^\text{21}\) The government has acknowledged the needs of refugees and allowed numerous humanitarian organizations to provide support both to them and Cameroonian civilians who have suffered as a result of the conflict with Boko Haram.

The Government of Cameroon has yet to fully acknowledge the severity of the situation in the NWSW and has actively discouraged the humanitarian community’s engagement there.

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\(^{\text{16}}\) “Emergency Response Plan, 2018.”
\(^{\text{17}}\) “Cameroon: North-West and South-West Crisis Situation Report No. 5.”
\(^{\text{18}}\) CORRECTION AND UPDATE: June 3, 2019. Refugees International mistakenly cited an earlier OCHA report that 40 schools had been closed and 42,500 children denied consistent access to education over the last three years in the NWSW regions of Cameroon. That correct citation is OCHA, “Emergency Response Plan, 2018, Summary,” Accessed May 18, 2019, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/cmr_nw_sw_fa_2018-05_summary_v07_light_0.pdf. Additionally, as the crisis has escalated, humanitarian workers have reported that the number of schools that have closed in the NWSW regions has risen to an estimated 4,400.
\(^{\text{19}}\) “Cameroon: North-West and South-West Crisis, Situation Report No. 4.”
\(^{\text{20}}\) “Cameroon: North-West and South-West Crisis, Situation Report No. 4.”
\(^{\text{21}}\) “Cameroon: Events of 2018.”
discouraged the humanitarian community’s engagement there. Cameroon’s Minister of Territorial Administration, Paul Atanga Nji, has said that NGOs are inflating numbers and promoting “fake news.” The government wrongly claims that only 152,000 people have been displaced in the country as a result of the Anglophone crisis, as opposed to the UN estimate of at least 530,000. Its nominal reaction has been to create a humanitarian response plan and coordination structure that violates humanitarian principles by demanding that humanitarian organizations support the objectives of the government and military.

The government of Cameroon has asserted that it will engage in dialogue only with “persons who are advancing the unity of Cameroon as a nation.” On the other hand, representatives of separatist armed groups have said that they will settle for independence or nothing. Although productive dialogue and long-term solutions remain elusive, the international community and the Government of Cameroon have a responsibility to the hundreds of thousands of civilians in need in the NWSW.

The failure of the Cameroonian state to engage effectively in the NWSW has created a gap in the humanitarian response that donors and foreign governments have yet to fill.

The failure of the Cameroonian state to engage effectively in the NWSW has created a gap in the humanitarian response that donors and foreign governments have yet to fill. Most international attention has been focused on supporting a peace process designed to bring an end to the fighting in the Anglophone regions. Certainly, the support of the international community and the Government of Cameroon have a responsibility to the hundreds of thousands of civilians in need in the NWSW.

**OVERCOMING OBSTACLES: HUMANITARIAN ACTORS EXPAND THEIR REACH**

Despite major obstacles, international humanitarian organizations have made considerable headway in expanding their operations into the NWSW. Using various strategies, international aid organizations have been able to provide assistance to 42,000 vulnerable people in the conflict zone and assess conditions for many more. INGOs continue to engage with local officials, communities, and armed groups to educate them about humanitarian principles, helping enable humanitarian workers to scale up and expand their reach in many parts of the NWSW.

Humanitarian partners told the Refugees International team of areas where they have overcome numerous obstacles to access

25.  “Cameroon: North-West and South-West Crisis Situation Report No. 5.”
to affected populations posed by the government and armed groups, and build up community acceptance. The map above shows the number of IDPs in those areas that organizations could access. The map demonstrates that, despite the challenges, relief groups have been able to engage with communities and populations in the majority of divisions in both the NW and SW—with humanitarian organizations having slightly greater reach into the NW.

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In areas completely or “partially accessible,” UN agencies and INGOs are using a mix of strategies to reach vulnerable populations, including negotiating with armed groups and adopting a grassroots approach centered on communication with village chiefs, religious leaders, and local organizations. Of course, effective negotiation requires significant time and resource commitments from aid groups. Representatives of one large international organization told the Refugees International team that they engage in at least two or three in-person meetings and consistent telecommunication with partners to explain humanitarian principles, create an understanding of potential aid, and establish trust. At present, they spend most of their time negotiating access.

In more remote rural areas, humanitarian workers must time their interventions carefully. Large numbers of civilians hide in densely wooded areas and come into town only on
market days or to attend religious services on Sundays. Such days provide a rare opportunity to engage these hard-to-reach populations. Some organizations operating in these areas expressed concern that many of their counterparts are not making effective use of church connections to gain the trust of communities and, in turn, increase their geographic coverage.

Partnering with Local Groups

Before the outbreak of conflict, the NWSW had numerous well-established civil society organizations that worked to protect civil liberties and further develop their regions, which were largely ignored and marginalized by the national government. As the crisis escalated, these organizations shifted their focus to help address the consequences of the conflict, thus moving to the forefront of the humanitarian response. Some UN agencies and INGOs have opted to tap into this network of pre-existing local organizations by providing funding or subcontracts to support their work. These local groups are both well known and well respected, enabling them to deliver humanitarian assistance to communities in areas unreachable by newly arriving, unfamiliar international actors.

Although there are advantages to partnering with local NGOs, many have little to no experience with humanitarian work and unfortunately lack the specific expertise needed to deliver humanitarian aid in a complex and conflict-ridden environment. At the onset of the crisis, many of them were unfamiliar with the humanitarian principles that should govern their responses. Even after receiving some training, many have struggled to adhere to those principles. In some instances, they have, for example, provided lists of their anticipated beneficiaries to Cameroonian authorities. It is crucial for international partners to ensure that the local groups with which they work or subcontract are trained to both understand and operate on the basis of humanitarian principles.

Some local NGOs have been provided with online courses, such as the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative’s “Building a Better Response.” However, this course and others like it must be made widely available to all implementing partners before they take any action. Additionally, organizations working on sector responses that require technical expertise—especially protection issues, such as sexual and gender-based violence and child protection—must be provided with training either in person or remotely. Training should be planned and carried out with international sectorial experts (such as cluster leads) to ensure it is as tailored and effective as possible.

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CHALLENGES FACING HUMANITARIAN RELIEF OPERATIONS

Despite their success in accessing populations to assess their needs, humanitarian actors face a series of major obstacles in establishing consistent access to provide aid to those displaced in the NWSW. Throughout these regions, freedom of movement is severely restricted, cutting people off from their land and basic services. Relief efforts are further complicated by the Cameroonian authorities’ continued denial of the severity
of the displacement and humanitarian needs. Moreover, both government forces and armed groups have largely refused to respect the humanitarian principles that guide relief groups’ operations.

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Impediments to Access

Violence, military operations, “ghost town” days, and multiday lockdowns have limited the ability of humanitarian groups to access the hundreds of thousands of people who need assistance. Since the beginning of 2019, armed groups have declared “ghost town” days every Monday and the 29th day of each month. During these days, all businesses are closed and road circulation is blocked. These armed groups have also announced many multiday lockdowns. As a result, humanitarian groups were able to operate for only five days in all of February. In early April, a 10-day lockdown prevented all access.

Even when “ghost town” rules are not in effect, access remains inconsistent and limited. By all accounts, the armed groups are extremely fragmented and loosely organized. This circumstance, coupled with the Cameroonian government’s refusal to recognize the severity of the crisis, has made negotiating access to civilian populations difficult.

The Cameroonian authorities and some armed groups will not permit assistance to reach many parts of the NWSW. Government forces and armed factions have established checkpoints on roads within and leading to these parts of the country. There, civilians, civil servants, health workers, and NGO staff are often asked for bribes, turned around, forced to surrender their equipment, threatened, or forcibly detained.

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Given that the government has downplayed the crisis and been unwilling to guarantee safe passage for humanitarian actors, many organizations fear speaking out against the government or publicly reporting the extent to which it has interfered with aid delivery. Aid groups withhold their criticism in the hope of preserving the already-limited humanitarian space. Many groups fear that the government will retaliate by blocking their access not only in the NWSW, but also in the Extreme North Region of Cameroon, where humanitarian organizations are providing for those displaced by Boko Haram’s ongoing violence.

In the Extreme North, the International NGO Safety Organization (INSO) helps NGOs by providing them with real-time security incident alerts, strategic planning support, crisis assistance, and guidance on improving access at no cost. Unfortunately, INSO has
yet to expand its operations into the NWSW, and it is unclear whether the Cameroonian government would authorize this expansion. INSO’s insight would enhance INGOs’ awareness of the challenging security environment and enable them to effectively plan around obstacles. Once INSO has the capacity to work in the NWSW, the Cameroonian government must allow it to broaden its work authorization beyond the Extreme North.

Humanitarian Principles and Coordination

Armed groups and the Cameroonian armed forces operate with little regard for humanitarian principles. Aid workers have reported numerous cases in which the Cameroonian military requested that they provide their list of beneficiaries as the price of gaining access to certain areas. International humanitarian organizations have refused to provide such information because such a breach of confidentiality could violate the humanitarian principle to “do no harm” by endangering those beneficiaries.

The Cameroonian government has argued erroneously that humanitarian principles cannot be applied in this context because the crisis should not be considered a “conflict” under international law. Government officials have told heads of international humanitarian organizations (including UN agencies) they are willing to cooperate and allow them to operate in the NWSW only if they openly communicate their support for the government. Such a stance would violate the humanitarian principle of neutrality, which dictates that aid organizations “must not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.”

The international community widely recognizes the practical importance of this fundamental principle—neutrality is essential for aid groups to gain acceptance from all communities throughout an affected region. The United Nations Security Council, for example, “recognizes the need for consistent engagement by humanitarian agencies with all parties to armed conflict for humanitarian purposes.” The Cameroonian government, national security forces, and armed groups need to accept that humanitarian organizations must have contact with all parties to the conflict to negotiate and guarantee access. Aid groups should not compromise their integrity by siding with any one party.

In June 2018, the Cameroonian government published its emergency humanitarian assistance plan for the NWSW and announced the creation of an ad hoc committee to oversee the coordination of the humanitarian response. Today, the coordination structure still has not been officially launched. However, given the role of Cameroonian security forces in the conflict, INGOs have indicated that they will not participate in this platform out of concern for their independence and neutrality. UN agencies on the other hand, have agreed to do so. The Cameroonian authorities have responded only by criticizing INGOs’ unwillingness to engage with the committee.

OCHA is the focal point of the humanitarian response, representing humanitarian actors in dealings with Cameroonian officials. OCHA leads “access working groups” in both the NWSW regions. These groups are designed to strengthen efforts to overcome access constraints. They enable the aid community to come together to share and analyze information on the obstruction of access and develop strategies to overcome these challenges.

OCHA has also taken the lead in developing and overseeing procedures to ensure INGO compliance with government requirements. However, although the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) has agreed on a set of “ground rules” upon which to engage and share information with the government, many aid organizations have failed to follow these guidelines effectively. Instances of INGOs not complying with the ground rules were reported to Refugees International. It is crucial that humanitarian actors uphold these agreed-upon standards so as not to give the Cameroonian authorities additional excuses to further shrink the accessible humanitarian space.

Funding

Despite some progress, these efforts by humanitarian actors to negotiate access, build trust with local communities, and strengthen local NGOs are facing an impasse. Relief groups lack the funds to deliver aid to the very communities with which they have built trust. Aid providers told Refugees International that many of the populations they have assessed are growing frustrated. They have explained their needs to humanitarian actors but have received little assistance because of insufficient funds. One aid worker told Refugees International, “We can’t be negotiating access when we have no aid to give.” The result could be that soon humanitarian organizations will lose access to these populations.

Urgent donor engagement is needed to remedy this situation. OCHA’s Cameroon Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for 2019 calls for $298 million to provide for the millions in need—refugees from Nigeria and the Central African Republic as well as Cameroon’s own IDPs. Out of the total funds soon will be forced to stop operations because little to no international funds have been made available. A lack of international donor engagement is leaving NGOs high and dry—at the cost of human lives.
requested, $93.5 million would be allocated to the response in the NWSW. As of late April 2019, this part of the appeal had been funded at only 9.1 percent.\(^{29}\)

Many donors cite obstacles to access as the reason for their reluctance to provide funding. In response, a handful of INGOs have chosen to use their internal funds to prove to donors that access indeed is possible. Despite the results of these efforts, highlighted above, donors have not responded. Aid groups warned in late March 2019 that they would likely run out of money in the coming weeks and months. They will then be forced to leave the NWSW, at great risk to the affected populations.

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An aid worker characterized donor engagement as a “moving goal post,” with donors repeatedly changing the conditions under which they would be willing to commit more support. These conditions include greater international visibility of the crisis, increased capacity of partnering local NGOs, and improved access for humanitarian workers. In addition, many aid workers told the Refugees International team that donors repeatedly add criteria for their organizations to meet before they can receive funds—once they meet the criteria, it seems, donors then set new conditions. Donors also expect them to collect data and carry out needs assessments to be considered for funding; however, these groups have conducted as many assessments and expanded their reach throughout as much of the NWSW as they can within their means. Humanitarian workers told Refugees International that it would be irresponsible for them to continue to assess the needs of the displaced without the funding to provide aid because it “creates expectations [among the displaced] for nothing.”

INGOs cannot continue to shoulder the financial responsibility for increasing access and aid provision. As mentioned above, many of those with which the Refugees International team spoke in late March 2019 warned that they would soon run out of operating funds. Moreover, the longer donors delay, the more difficult it will be for relief organizations to preserve their access to populations in need—if donors wait to allocate funds, organizations that have been forced to leave the affected region will have even less access to the area’s most vulnerable people, even if they are able to return.

Donors should not wait for conditions to deteriorate further. They must immediately contribute funds to reach the $93.5 million needed for a thorough response—allowing organizations to not only continue their ongoing work but also to expand their presence and operations. All funding must be provided in a flexible manner, permitting actors to change the sector and geographic scopes of their efforts as the conflict dynamics change and needs evolve.

Because the crisis shows no signs of waning, donors must look at long-term funding options. OCHA should begin establishing the mechanisms needed for Country-Based Pooled Funds for Cameroon, with support from donor countries. Pooled funds are flexible and not earmarked, and thus allow both local and international aid organizations to respond to the most pressing needs in a timely manner. This effort should be

\(^{29}\) “Cameroon: North-West and South-West Crisis Situation Report No. 5.”
supported by countries contributing the most to pooled funds, such as the United Kingdom, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, and Ireland. With this additional funding, OCHA, UNHCR, and other UN agencies operating in the NWSW will need to establish permanent positions in their offices in Bamenda and Buea. Currently, most staff are assigned on a temporary basis—however, continuity will be essential for maintaining access to affected communities.

Out of all international humanitarian donors, only Canada and the European Union have conducted scoping missions focused on possible funding. Other donors must immediately plan evaluation missions to better understand the necessity for immediate funding. To date, most financing has been provided to coordinate the aid efforts rather than fund the delivery of aid. In mid-April, the Government of Canada announced an injection of 6.65 million Canadian dollars Can$), at least Can$1 million of which is specifically for the NWSW.30 More recently, the EU announced the provision of 3 million euros, and the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance has allocated US$1 million for the NWSW response. Although Refugees International welcomes this news, these amounts are grossly inadequate and more substantive engagement is urgently needed.

### Humanitarian Diplomacy

Funding is not the only area in which the international community must step up its engagement. Although senior international officials have focused on the peace process, there is an urgent need for international pressure on all parties involved in the conflict to ease the suffering of civilians. Cameroonian leadership and armed groups have all but refused to engage in a good faith dialogue. Though a political process must be pursued, it cannot be the only approach to addressing the population’s mounting needs—humanitarian diplomacy must also become a priority.

Cameroonian leadership and armed groups have all but refused to engage in a good faith dialogue. Though a political process must be pursued, it cannot be the only approach to addressing the population’s mounting needs.

The United States has openly commented on the severity of the crisis and even halted some of its military assistance following reports of rights violations by the Cameroonian military.31 Refugees International welcomes these condemnations of the role of Cameroonian security forces in the crisis but is disappointed they have not been accompanied by sufficiently increased funding for relief to cope with the humanitarian consequences of those violations. Although embassy staff from other countries claim to be practicing “quiet diplomacy” on this issue—believing a bilateral approach is the best way to get Cameroonian leadership to rectify its behavior—very few of these countries have provided humanitarian funds for the NWSW.

The crisis also requires immediate engagement from UN leadership. There are reports that UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has spoken to Cameroonian President Paul...
Biya. However, there is little to indicate that these conversations have resulted in tangible change. Given the stalemate between aid groups and Cameroonian leadership, and the deteriorating humanitarian situation, the Secretary General should plan a visit to Cameroon. This visit could increase the global visibility of the crisis, mobilize donor support, and bring pressure on President Biya to guarantee unfettered humanitarian access.

In July 2018, then-UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein released a statement expressing his disappointment that Cameroonian authorities had repeatedly refused to “grant the UN Human Rights Office access to the Northwest and Southwest.” He also condemned the attacks by non-state armed groups and called out the “heavy-handed security response” of the government. This public acknowledgement of the Cameroonian military’s wrongdoing was crucial, but the UN Human Rights Office must do more to look into the extent of human rights violations. The new High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet Jeria, traveled to Cameroon this spring. Unfortunately, the High Commissioner’s statement following her visit scarcely acknowledged the Cameroonian government’s role in the ongoing human rights violations and in preventing humanitarian aid from reaching those in need. The High Commissioner must continue to call for access for her teams to conduct thorough investigations and ensure that they publish a detailed report.

Enabling Public Reporting

In all humanitarian crises, aid organizations on the ground play a key role in drawing international attention to the plight of those affected. In the NWSW, aid groups have been silenced by government intimidation. There are numerous reports of members of the military or government officials threatening to block operations or possibly expel organizations after they publicly reported on acts of violence, or even the extent of humanitarian need. This dynamic has created an environment in which humanitarian actors cannot speak out, especially on their own.

Instead, organizations should consider creating a unified entity to jointly report on the dire situation and ensuing needs. In many humanitarian contexts, organizations such as INGO Fora provide a platform for INGOs to collectively report on operational realities and challenges. These collective groups can be vocal, with less fear of direct government reprisals against any one member. Such a platform for Cameroon would be tremendously helpful for operational humanitarian INGOs. Organizations and donors alike should consider and support the establishment of a similar platform, which could operate either from within or outside of the country.

CONCLUSION

The Government of Cameroon has acknowledged some level of ongoing displacement and need for humanitarian assistance in the NWSW. However, it has largely continued to deny the severity of the crisis and decidedly failed to live up to its responsibility to address the needs of its citizens. The government must allow safe passage for civilians, humanitarian staff, and health workers who are tirelessly endeavoring to play the leading role in

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33. “UN Human Rights Chief Deeply Alarmed by Reports of Serious Rights Breaches in Cameroon.”
providing for Cameroonians who require assistance in the NWSW.

Given the efforts of aid organizations currently present in the NWSW, the inaction of many international donor governments is appalling. A political solution to the conflict is vital but is unlikely to materialize fast enough to curb the current intensification of human suffering. The international community must play a larger role in addressing the needs of those in the NWSW. Amid continued calls for dialogue, they must also shed light on the worsening situation and ensure that the capacities of aid organizations are bolstered to effectively address the needs of those caught in the crossfire.

Indeed, at present, inadequate funding means the needs far exceed the capacities of aid groups to respond. However, if funding is secured, there is hope for a significant scale-up and increased access to communities in need. Humanitarian organizations have proven their ability to reach populations in need throughout the NWSW, despite extremely challenging access constraints. Their success in accessing and building trust with these communities should be reason enough for donors to trust that, with proper funding, they can continue to improve the dire situation facing the civilian population of the NWSW.

Refugees International Advocate Alexandra Lamarche and Special Assistant to the President Alanna Fox traveled to Cameroon in March and April 2019.
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ABOUT REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL

Refugees International advocates for lifesaving assistance and protection for displaced people and promotes solutions to displacement crises around the world. We are an independent organization and do not accept any government or UN funding.