



THE PLIGHT OF IDPS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE ARMED CONFLICT IN THE TWO ENGLISH-SPEAKING REGIONS OF CAMEROON

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Abstract

Internally displaced persons are often born out of conflicts or natural disasters. They are present in most conflict-ridden societies not least in Cameroon. The root of the ongoing conflict in the two English-speaking regions is as a result of the long-term marginalization, discrimination and corruption perpetuated against English speakers which has turned the people to rebel for a better future. Internally displaced persons are often subjected to various challenges such as abuse, social exclusion. Lack of food, torture, rape, homelessness among others.

Keywords: Plight, Internal Displacement, Armed Conflicts

INTRODUCTION

Internally displaced people are those who have been forced or obliged to leave their homes behind notably for reasons related to armed conflicts or other violence and who remain within the borders of their country.² There is no universal, legally binding instrument equivalent to this 1851 refugee's convention that specifically addressed their plight. Nonetheless internally displaced people are protected by international human right law and domestic law and in situation of armed conflict by international humanitarian law (IHL).

Additionally, the UN guiding principles on internal displacement provide useful guidance on displacement. They have broad support from the international community and many states have incorporated them into domestic law. Many of the rules contained in the guiding principles are part and parcel of international human right laws and international humanitarian law for example the principles make clear that state have a duty to provide displaced persons with lasting returns

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² Guiding principle on internal displacement, ecn.4 1999 ado February 11 New York united nation.



resettlement and reintegration solutions and that displaced persons must be involved in planning and managing measures that concern them.³

The ongoing crisis in the two English speaking regions of Cameroon has brought a lot of rampage and changes to which one of them is the internal displacement of people mostly from the two affected regions of Cameroon (northwest and southwest). It has not only cause displacement but violation of human rights causing some to leave the country seeking asylum in other countries.

Challenges faced by IDPs in Cameroon

IDPs in Cameroon face a range of serious protection concerns, some of which already existed before the current armed conflict plaguing the two English speaking regions but have been made worse since its outbreak in 2016. The various challenges faced by IDPs due to the ongoing armed conflict will be discussed in the subsequent paragraphs.

a. Physical security

Human security situation of IDPs in the Northwest and Southwest Regions of Cameroon keeps getting worse due to the continuous attacks and fighting's between the state military and secessionist. IDPs located in temporary shelters in the remote, unprotected area, are living in fear of atrocity and insufficient humanitarian supplies.⁴

“I could not take any clothes. There was shooting. They killed my uncle and shot my cousin, said Loveline. As she fled into the bush, gunmen shot dead her husband. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the armed men douse their house in petrol and set it alight”.

IDPs in Cameroon continue to witness such atrocities even in the bushes where they seek refuge. Though available, the humanitarian bodies offering assistance to them are not able to cover all the IDPs population and places especially and thus cannot offer absolute protection.⁵ Most organizations try to cover all gaps but lack of capacities and funds is a grave limitation. Also, IDPs' places of refuge do not always provide them with the protection from physical threats that they seek⁶. Displacement sites have also been the target of attacks due to the current conflict; as a

³ Ibid.

⁴ Interview with Anang Bernard, employee with Plan Cameroon

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, Norwegian Refugee Council Report, May 2015.



result, destitution forced displaced girls and young women to resort to survival sex, in some cases resulting in underage or unwanted pregnancies.⁷

Disabled IDPs who are most vulnerable during conflicts are often left behind when their families flee, but those who are displaced faced additional threats both during their flight and in displacement sites. They are often unable to bring their wheelchairs and crutches, to move as fast as others or to take safer routes through the bush, leaving them vulnerable to fatal attacks by armed groups on roads.⁸ Displacement sites are not adapted for people with reduced mobility, and the uneven terrain and open sewers have the potential to cause accidents.⁹

b. Freedom of movement

Many IDPs suffer severe restrictions to their freedom of movement, particularly those living in areas referred to as enclaves. Most IDPs become trapped in such areas on their way to safer places or while regrouping to shield themselves against attack. Surrounded by armed militias and mobs, they are barely able to leave the enclaves if at all.¹⁰

Those trapped face varying levels of security threats, movement restrictions and aid dependency. The living conditions in many enclaves have deteriorated drastically over time. Inhabitants endure the psychological stress of entrapment and threats to their physical safety, and many are unable to access markets, work or cultivate their land, making them more vulnerable to food insecurity.¹¹

c. Economic and social situation

The majority of civilians in two English Regions of Cameroon depend on agriculture, shifting cultivation, while few depend on trading.¹² Most citizens in rural areas are seasonal farmers working in plantations. Their livelihood depends on land and selling forest products such as vegetables, plantain, tomatoes and so on. However, due to the armed conflict, many IDPs have lost the basis for their livelihoods as a result of their displacement. Displaced farmers tend to struggle to cultivate if they are able to do so at all, herders lose their livestock and traders' networks

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Human rights watch, April 2020.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Zaw L., Op cit.

¹¹ Human Rights Watch, 22 December 2014.

¹² Ibid.



are disrupted and their stocks looted.¹³ The few belongings IDPs have left are sometimes stolen by armed men or other civilians.¹⁴

Displacement due to the armed conflict in Cameroon has forced citizens to abandon everything they possess in their original locations. For farmers, it is impossible to return and collect farms, crops lands, farming animals, tools for cultivation that they left since the armed conflict situation had intensified. In fear of being killed, raped, tortured, no IDPs have ever dared to go back and collect the crops¹⁵.

As a result, food insecurity among IDPs and their host communities is on the rise. IDPs' dire socio-economic situation is made worse by their limited access to basic services, particularly in displacement sites and rural areas. Elderly IDPs and those with disabilities face additional challenges in accessing services because of their limited mobility and their lack of understanding of the situation.¹⁶

Violence and displacement have forced families to separate, and there are many unaccompanied children in the two affected regions in Cameroon. Community members and religious leaders have looked after some in displacement sites, but without their parents' care, they are more vulnerable to abuse, neglect, exploitation and forced recruitment. A displaced girl died in Bamenda due to malnutrition in February 2018, after refusing to eat until he and his siblings were reunited with their parents.¹⁷

d. Access to education

Education in the two English speaking regions in Cameroon over the past years has gravely deteriorated as a result of the ongoing crisis that has since 2016 hit the two regions. The most affected by this crisis are IDPs who have been forced to leave their regions of origin to unknown location in search of refuge. This crisis has affected mainly children who are force to flee with their parents; leaving their properties, books and other education related items. As a result of this, the right to education of such children are jeopardized.

Even though parents flee safely with their kids to new locations, they are unable to send them to school as they find themselves living in very unfavorable conditions; which does not permit them

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Interview with Njome Jessica, a displaced woman from Ekona.

¹⁵ United Nation's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2012/

¹⁶ Human rights watch, April 2015.

¹⁷ UNHCR, 17 February 2018.



to send their children to school. Parents of this children lack sources of livelihood and so cannot send their displaced children to new schools.

e. Access to Health care

IDPs face many barriers in exercising their rights to access high-quality health care in many developing countries particularly Cameroon. Often medical institutions are inaccessible for them, especially for those living in very remote areas. Another major barrier is a lack of transportation which either makes them miss appointments or fail to show up. Lack of medicine, health facilities and professional are also major concerns of IDPs. It should be noted that lack of adequate and timely health care provision can lead to disease outcomes.¹⁸

It is therefore important for health-care professionals to develop realistic expertise in listening to, understanding, and responding to the diverse needs of IDPs. It is also important to provide context specific skills, related to the health-care delivery to this vulnerable group of persons.¹⁹

f. Access to employment

Observations and several reports proof that majority of internally displaced persons in Cameroon are unemployed. From the various interviews conducted, the study noted most IDPs particularly women and survived on incomes gotten from begging, petty businesses, and assistance from relatives and well-wishers. Simo Catherine²⁰ Reported that being displaced makes it very difficult for her to get a job.

Other studies on rights of internally displaced persons indicate that displaced youths find it difficult to be enrolled for professional trainings and apprenticeships²¹. Without professional training, the opportunities of this vulnerable persons are limited in society and they end up relying on begging, support, and donations from government and well-wishers. Thus, they lose on the chance to develop to their full potential and fail to integrate into society.²²

Internally displaced persons have the necessary skills and credentials, employers discriminate against them and misunderstand them, making it impossible for them to find work.²³ Indeed, most employers doubt their capacities. Besides, IDPs face limited employment opportunities, and face

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰ She is an IDP from kumba in the southwest Region

²¹Groce et al., "Disability and Poverty: the need for a more nuanced understanding of implications for development policy and practice", 2011.

²² Cowen D., "Girls with Disabilities in Zimbabwe's Inclusive Rural Schools: Challenges and Possibilities", 2020.

²³*Ibid.*



challenges in accessing job adverts and other job-related information.²⁴ An interview with Glory revealed the problem of limited opportunities:

I was a primary school teacher in Ngie village in the Northwest Region of Cameroon. Due to the crisis, schools stopped functioning and I left for Douala. Since 2017 that I got here, I have been unable to locate a job.²⁵

Internally displaced persons in Cameroon are poverty-stricken and face adversity due to geographic isolation and the lack of economic activity. Cameroon has been going through socio-economic and political crisis in recent years as a result of poor governance. This conflict have resulted in the shutdown of many companies and industries that used to employ people in both rural and urban areas. The conflict has also resulted to recruitments being frozen. This freezing of recruitment in civil service has increased the level of unemployment. In 2019, Cameroon's unemployment level was estimated at 3.34%²⁶. Without policies that emphasis on inclusion of IDPs, this group particularly will continue to face challenges in the employment sector.

Conclusion.

The international community, comprised of sovereign states and international organizations, already recognizes that forced population displacement/movement puts displaced populations and persons into situations where security and human rights protection are acutely compromised. They also recognize that there is a global IDP problem; given the numbers of IDPs in the world, it is hard to ignore their presence. The creation and ratification of the Kampala Convention relating IDPs and other human rights treaties shows that the international community has long recognized and accepted that there is a correlative international responsibility to protect those who are caught in the vacuum of sovereignty, where the state is either unwilling or unable to provide the necessary protection and provisions to its population.

Within the forced population community, IDPs, like refugees, require international action to guarantee their security and human rights. Without equal protection and guarantee of rights, including to IDPs, "some human lives end up mattering a great deal less to the international community than others."²⁷

²⁴Mizunoya S. and Sophie Mitra, "Is there a Disability Gap in Employment Rates in Developing Countries?", 2013. *World Development*, vol. 42, issue C, PP. 28-43.

²⁵ Interview with Gloria an IDP.

²⁶ Plecher H., "Unemployment rate in Cameroon", February 2020.

²⁷ Kuan-Wen L, op cit.



In Cameroon, the problems faced by IDPs cannot be over emphasized. As discussed above, IDPs face varied problems which without proper intervention by the state, they will continue to suffer more challenges.

Recommendations

In order to enhance the protection of IDPs in Cameroon, certain recommendations must be made from the findings of this study

Cameroon should enact a national law to compel all agencies with the mandate of protecting IDPs to respect the standards set under the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.

The Cameroon government should fight corruption, marginalization and discrimination which is the root cause of the ongoing crisis in the two English speaking regions of Cameroon. If this is done, future conflicts will be avoided and the problem of internal displacement will be forever eliminated.

Both the government and agencies advocating for the rights of IDPs should sensitize the general population on the problem of displacement and encourage them to see IDPs as people in a very vulnerable state who need assistance and protection. By so doing, they will be received with open arms at the receiving communities.

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