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By Richard J. Pera

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UNHCR staff and local authorities assist recently arrived Cameroonians seeking refuge in Obanliku, southeast Nigeria, October 2017. (Source: "UNHCR Condemns Forced Returns of Cameroon Asylum-Seekers from Nigeria," UNHCR/Jacob Pahar, <http://www.unhcr.org/5a731fc4.html>.)

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By Sarah Graveline

On February 5, 2018, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) opened the second round of talks between the South Sudanese government and rebel groups under the High Level Revitalization Forum (HLRF). The HLRF's first round concluded in December 2017 with a ceasefire that was almost immediately violated by both sides. Since December, the international community has increased pressure on the government of South Sudan through an arms embargo and sanctions. While South Sudan's objections to these policies suggest they have successfully increased diplomatic pressure, the government maintains a military advantage on the ground that will likely prevent meaningful progress through the HLRF talks. [more...](#)



A demonstrator holds a placard during a rally protesting the U.S. unilateral arms embargo on the country, in Juba, South Sudan, Tuesday, February 6, 2018. (Source: AP Photo/Sam Mednick.)

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The Institute for Defense Analyses is a non-profit corporation operating in the public interest.

IDA's three federally-funded research and development centers provide objective analyses of national security issues and related national challenges, particularly those requiring scientific and technical expertise.

IDA's Africa team focuses on issues related to political, economic, and social stability and security on the continent.

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Origins of the Crisis

[Cameroon's Anglophone crisis originated with](#) League of Nations political decisions following Germany's defeat in World War I. The League mandated parts of German "Kamerun" to Britain and France. In 1960, France granted independence to its colony, "French Cameroons" (French-speaking and mostly Roman Catholic). British-controlled "Northern Cameroons" (English-speaking and mostly Muslim) became part of Nigeria. British-controlled "Southern Cameroons" (English-speaking and mostly Protestant) voted to join "French Cameroons" and form the Federal Republic of Cameroon in 1961. The country was renamed United Republic of Cameroon in 1972 and Republic of Cameroon in 1984. Today, the former "Southern Cameroons" is divided into two Anglophonic regions—Southwest (capital: Buea) and Northwest (capital: Bamenda)—with nearly 3.5 million residents, comprising about 20 percent of Cameroon's population.

As *Africa Watch* has [reported, since 1961](#), Cameroon's Anglophones have disagreed with what they perceived as increasingly centralized rule under French-majority control. Despite constitutional guarantees, many Anglophones believe the central government in Yaounde has intentionally eroded English-speaking traditions. They also resent that national resources have not been shared fairly.

The current [crisis](#) began in October 2016 when lawyers and teachers went on strike to oppose French-speaking lawyers and teachers in Anglophone courts and schools, respectively. Protests spread to cities in both regions. The government reacted in heavy-handed fashion by applying an anti-terrorism law (originally focused on Boko Haram) against protest organizers. In blocking internet access when opponents used social media to organize protests, the government's actions caused [financial hardship and angered many Anglophones](#).

The Crisis Enters a New Phase

On October 1, 2017, Anglophone leaders [declared](#) an independent "Federal Republic of Ambazonia," encompassing Southwest and Northwest Cameroon. Ambazonia (demonym: "Amba") refers to Amba Bay on the Gulf of Guinea, whose 19th century British colony was home to freed slaves. The declaration was preceded by sporadic violence by separatist groups and violent repression by security forces. Their leader [proclaimed](#): "We, the people of Southern Cameroons, are slaves to no one... Not now, not ever again. It's time to tell Yaounde that enough is enough."

In early October 2017, tens of thousands of Anglophones began peaceful marches in Bamenda, Buea, and other towns. Police, reinforced by soldiers, responded by firing live ammunition at demonstrators, killing at least 40 and injuring more than 100. Security forces arrested about 1,000 people without warrant, burned and looted homes, and tortured and sexually abused residents. [According to Amnesty International](#), police made arbitrary mass arrests during October, and

prisons were described as being “packed like sardines.” The government deployed the elite Special Forces unit known as the “BIR” (French acronym for Rapid Intervention Battalion) to the Anglophone regions; this was significant because the BIR, used extensively against Boko Haram, reports directly to the president.

The government claimed that secessionists torched schools and businesses, attacked police and Gendarmerie facilities, and killed 19 soldiers and police officers. The government also claimed militants produced and deployed improvised explosive devices, not only in Anglophone areas, but in Douala, Cameroon’s business capital and largest city.

Crisis Is Internationalized in 2018

Cameroon’s fall 2017 crackdown has forced at least [15,000 Anglophone refugees](#) to flee for Nigeria. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 8,500 of them have registered in Nigeria’s neighboring [Cross River State](#), a region that tried unsuccessfully to secede from Nigeria during the 1960s Biafran Crisis. The UNHCR representative in Nigeria described the refugees as “mostly children, women, and the elderly, with very few men . . . they are coming daily. It is a crisis.”

Members of the Southern Cameroons National Council that formed The Interim Government of Ambazonia were [arrested](#) at a hotel in Abuja, Nigeria, on January 5, 2018. Among those arrested was Sisiku Ayuk Tabe, the self-proclaimed President of the Federal Republic of Ambazonia. Cameroon authorities announced that [Ayuk Tabe](#) and other “terrorists” were [extradited to Cameroon](#), where they “will answer for their crimes before the Cameroonian courts.” The UNHCR [criticized](#) the extradition because members of the group had requested asylum: “Their forcible return is a violation of the principle of non-refoulement, which constitutes the cornerstone of international refugee law.” Amnesty International [warned](#) they could be threatened with torture and given an unfair trial in Cameroon.

Motives of Cameroon and Nigeria

The Cameroonian government likely will follow through on its stated intention to prosecute Ayuk Tabe and other Amba leaders. The secession movement is viewed as traitorous by most Francophones. President Paul Biya likely views the secessionist movement not only as a threat to the integrity of the state but also to his own rule (he is the longest serving non-royal national leader in the world). We can expect the government crackdown to continue, especially in advance of presidential elections late this year. Biya, however, likely will appear conciliatory to appeal to the international community as he did in his recent [New Year’s speech](#): “I should make it clear that . . . dialogue has always been and will always be the best means of resolving problems, so long as it is strictly in line with republican legality.”

On February 5, 2018, the Nigerian National Security Advisor [publicly backed Cameroon](#) on the issue of Anglophone secession. This position was already manifest by Nigeria’s decision to extradite Ayuk Tabe in the absence of an extradition treaty between the two countries. Some observers hold that the rationale behind Nigeria’s decision was that if the Anglophone secession were allowed to succeed, it might rekindle the Biafran secessionist movement ([according to a 2017 poll](#), that movement is gaining support among young people). Nigeria can continue to count on the Cameroon government’s cooperation in the war against Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin.

Conclusion

Cameroon scored a tactical victory by imprisoning Ambazonia’s entire leadership at once. That event, and the government’s violent crackdown in the Northwest and Southwest Regions, however, may encourage more Anglophones to join the independence struggle.

In the long term, though, the outlook for Anglophone independence is not good. Financial and political support for the secession movement is lacking. Nigeria has chosen to support Cameroon. The [African Union](#) has been largely silent, and the European Union has [emphasized dialogue](#) to respect “the unity and integrity of the country.”

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From ARCSS to HLRF: A Background to Negotiations

Since gaining independence in 2011, South Sudan has had only three years of relative peace. In 2013, conflict broke out when President Salva Kiir [ousted](#) Riek Machar, his then vice president, citing his suspicion that Machar was plotting a coup. IGAD, a regional bloc comprising Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, and Uganda, stepped in to lead [negotiations](#) to resolve the conflict. In August 2015, Kiir and Machar signed the resulting Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS), which laid out a path to power-sharing.

ARCSS held for only a year before fighting between Kiir and Machar's forces in the capital, Juba, reopened the civil war. As [Africa Watch](#) reported, Machar was ultimately forced to flee and is currently in South Africa, [reportedly](#) under house arrest. The opposition fractured in his absence, and the conflict is increasingly being fought along ethnic lines.

In June 2017, IGAD launched another attempt at negotiations by announcing it would facilitate the HLRF talks. From its inception, the HLRF has been politically delicate. Technically, its [mandate](#) is to strengthen the ARCSS process, because Kiir has made clear he will [not renegotiate](#) ARCSS. The situation on the ground has, however, changed dramatically since ARCSS was negotiated due to Machar's absence and the continued fracturing of opposition groups. The HLRF has attempted to bridge this gap by widening [participation](#) to eight armed groups, the government of South Sudan, and some civil society organizations.

The HLRF has achieved mixed results so far. Following its first meeting in December 2017, the government of South Sudan and eight South Sudanese armed groups signed a [cessation of hostilities agreement](#) that entered into force on December 24. The agreement was [criticized](#) for its weak enforcement mechanisms, and the Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring Mechanism, the monitoring body tasked with assessing violations, [accused](#) both sides of breaking the agreement almost immediately after it was signed.

International Community Signals Greater Willingness to Intervene

In the lead-up to the second round of HLRF talks, the international community tightened pressure on South Sudan's government. On February 2, 2018, the United States announced it was imposing an [arms ban](#) on South Sudan that would prohibit American companies from exporting defense materials to the country. South Sudan [recalled](#) its ambassador to the U.S. in response.

Although the United States imposed the arms ban unilaterally, U.S. government officials [framed](#) the ban as part of a larger push for international cooperation in limiting arms transfers to South Sudan. The same day the European Union

imposed [sanctions](#) on two current and one former South Sudanese government officials, following similar sanctions imposed by the United States in September 2017.

The U.S. and European actions will have limited impact without broader regional support given that the majority of small arms and light weapons in South Sudan were [transferred](#) from Kenya and Uganda, not as a result of direct sales from the West. On [January 29](#), however, the head of the African Union (AU) Commission announced that the AU supported imposing sanctions on leaders who violate the ceasefire in South Sudan. AU pressure may signal increasing regional willingness to address ongoing violence.

Despite Pressure, South Sudanese Government Maintains an Upper Hand

Although the South Sudanese government has expressed frustration with growing international pressure, sanctions have done little to alter facts on the ground. The South Sudanese government continues to retain the upper hand militarily, having pushed a key opposition group out of its headquarters in Equatoria in [December](#). Currently, the government controls most urban areas while the opposition is fractured and [reportedly](#) struggling to procure weapons.

The government has shored up its military victories by tightening control over civil society and the media. The [Committee for the Protection of Journalists](#), an advocacy group, has accused the government of undertaking a “campaign of intimidating journalists” by denying accreditation and jailing journalists who report stories critical of the government.

Humanitarian Crisis

Years of fighting have created a protracted humanitarian crisis in South Sudan. The [conflict](#) has displaced 1.9 million people within South Sudan, while an additional 2.4 million are currently seeking asylum in neighboring countries. In total, the UN estimates that [7 million](#) South Sudanese, over half the country’s population, will require humanitarian assistance in 2018.

Conclusion

The scale of the crisis argues for near-term peace talks. The HLRF is, however, a weak mechanism to negotiate peace. If talks do not go the way the government wants, there is little to stop it from continuing its military campaign. Similarly, a leading [opposition group](#) has stated its intention to continue fighting should the talks fall through. International efforts to exert pressure, through sanctions, are an important step in support of compliance. Also, South Sudan’s neighbors could become more active in blocking arms transfers to increase incentives for all sides to seek peace.

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