

THE ANGLOPHONE CRISIS IN CAMEROON

(A&P 2019, p. 279–82, 29–30)

In the west African country of Cameroon, a crisis has escalated into violence, causing Anglophone Cameroonians to flee into Nigeria. Several Presbyterian congregations in Canada, in Toronto and Montreal in particular, include Cameroonian members who fervently wish to bring this situation to the attention of our church. They have received first-hand accounts of human rights abuses, including the following from a resident of Batibo, a town in Anglophone Cameroon.

The good news is that I am still alive but on the other hand, the military burnt to ashes my house after a fierce battle last Monday. Where do I start? All my life savings to build an abode for my family has gone down the drain...Batibo has become Baghdad and ungovernable. My entire family fled...several months ago. The place is not safe at all...The only reason that I was still hanging in Batibo was my job that enables me to put food on the table for my family and my house that was being constructed. I am trying to pick up any remnants and join my family soonest and then relocate to Nigeria in the days ahead. We are at war! Serious war! The military is displaying their arsenal while the Amba [separatist] fighters are going fetish [crazy] as each day goes by. I am only one of the numerous people who have lost almost everything. When the military suffers defeat, they vent their anger on unarmed civilians (Anonymous).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The present-day Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon has roots in colonialism and the aftermath of the First and Second World Wars. Germany had seized “Kamerun” as a colony in 1884 but after its defeat in 1918, the League of Nations divided Cameroon into two mandates, one ruled by Britain and one by France. These became UN trust territories after World War II. French Cameroon became independent on January 1, 1960, as the Republic of Cameroon. British Cameroon voted to enter into a federation with French Cameroon, effective October 1, 1961, thus forming the Federal Republic of Cameroon. The Federation was dissolved in 1972 in favour of a union of the two former colonies as the United Republic of Cameroon.

Today Cameroon has a population of 25 million in 10 semi-autonomous regions: eight are Francophone and the remaining two in the North and Southwest regions are home to the approximately five million English-speaking minority. At the time of both the 1961 Federation and the 1972 Union, certain guarantees were made to the Anglophone minority: both French and English would be official languages; Anglophones would continue to have their own separate English school system and their own English language legal system based on British Common Law. These constitutionally guaranteed rights have been ignored and overridden by the autocratic regime of President Biya, who has served as President since 1982.

THE CURRENT CRISIS

Anglophone Cameroonians have long complained that their language and culture are marginalized by the government, which has been led and dominated by Francophones. They want English language protection for judicial, educational and local government systems as was constitutionally guaranteed. Routinely they are kept out of employment and educational opportunities and are ignored culturally, politically and economically. Governed centrally, the Union was supposed to be a partnership of equals but it never was; not one ruling president has spoken or understood English.

In October 2016, lawyers peacefully demonstrated to force an end to the government’s practice of appointing Francophone magistrates to preside over the Anglophone courts ignoring British Common Law. Many of the lawyers, who were peacefully demonstrating wearing wigs and gowns, were arrested and held without trial, suffering at the hands of the government authorities. Barrister Agbor Felix Nkongho, a human rights lawyer and President of the Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium, later appeared as a witness before the Canadian Parliamentary Subcommittee on International Human Rights. He detailed his arrest and detention for three months without charge or trial after he participated in the peaceful demonstration. He urged Canadian parliamentarians to become involved in finding solutions to Cameroon’s humanitarian crisis, believing that as a bilingual country Canada has influence among many Anglophone and Francophone countries (Isambay, 2018).

After the arrest of the demonstrating lawyers, teachers protested urging the government to refrain from hiring Francophone only teachers to teach in Anglophone areas. Following this, internet connection was denied in the Anglophone areas and journalists were muzzled to suppress further protests (Allison, 2017). English speakers took to the streets. In response the government arrested thousands of peaceful protesters, imprisoning many for months without charge or trial. Civilians are routinely tried in a military tribunal in French only. There have been reports of

the killing of hundreds of Anglophones Cameroonians, of abusing women and children and setting fire to their homes. The violence has fueled support for armed separatists who have retaliated with attacks on government militia with the result that dozens have died on both sides and innocent civilians have fled to neighbouring Nigeria (Zongo, 2018).

On September 9, 2017, the Ambazonia Defense Council (ADC), deployed by the Ambazonia Defence Forces (ADF) in Southern Cameroon led by Chief Benedict Kuah, declared war on the government of Cameroon to achieve the independence of the Federation of Ambazonia. The ADC declared, “The state of war that has been declared on the state of Ambazonia by the illegitimate and brutal colonial government of La Republique du Cameroun [LRC] is hereby engaged in self-defence and for the liberation of the Federation of Ambazonia from systematic human rights abuses and illegal action without a union treaty” (Admin, 2017).

This situation is at crisis level with no clear solution. Amnesty International has reported on human rights violations, stating that not only are the government military forces at fault but also the ADF has carried out armed attacks against the Cameroonian security forces involving the destruction of schools and ordinary civilians (Amnesty International, 2017).

The UN Security Council has become increasingly interested in this crisis that has displaced over 160,000 people internally and more than 30,000 refugees into Nigeria. The British Ambassador, Karen Pierce, has suggested there has to be more opportunity for dialogue and less involvement of the military. The Cameroonian Government as of July 2018 has taken the initiative to form an emergency humanitarian plan to aid those who are affected by the crisis but the refugees in Nigeria are unable to access this plan. The UN Human Rights Council has reported that there is a curfew imposed in the Anglophone regions to allow military forces to contain any attacks by the armed separatists on the government militia. Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights from 2014–2018, said, “I urge the Government to make every effort to de-escalate the conflict in the Anglophone regions and to allow unimpeded access to human rights monitors so that accurate information on the situation can inform constructive engagement on the way forward” (Access Now, 2018).

On November 6, 2018, Cameroon's 85-year old President Paul Biya was sworn in for another seven years proclaiming that he will do all in his power to bring peace. After Biya's five consecutive terms in office, this may be lip service only. Very soon after the peaceful protests of 2016, the Roman Catholic bishops sent a memorandum to President Biya concerning the Anglophone problem and civil unrest in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon. This document outlined the complete lack of English language usage and indicated that there had been a conscious effort to flood Anglophone Cameroon with Francophone administrators and workers: state institutions' documents are only produced in French but it is expected that English-speaking Cameroonians will read and understand them; National Entrance Examinations for all professional schools are available only in French; and if an Anglophone is visiting a government office they are expected to express their needs in French. The memorandum called for constructive dialogue with the lawyers and teachers and for the recognition that there are legitimate, genuine demands that can be addressed if there is a willingness to recognize the Anglophone Crisis. After seeing pictures of protesting students being brutally dragged through mud, sprayed with tear gas and locked up for days, the bishops also appealed to President Biya and law enforcement offices to exercise respect for human rights (WCA, 2016).

SEEKING PEACE

There has been some international recognition of the crisis. The US Department of State has urged “an immediate halt to the indiscriminate targeting of civilians and burning of houses by Cameroonian Government forces and to attacks perpetrated by both Anglophone separatists against security forces and civilians” (US Department of State, 2018). Also there was condemnation of the mass kidnapping from a Presbyterian secondary school in Bamenda of 79 sleeping students, who were later released. Such senseless tampering with the human right to education requires the international community to speak out together.

What is the way forward to convince the Cameroonian Government to end the violence and seek peace through discussion and diplomacy? The Presbyterian Church in Canada and other members of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) stand together with its member churches in Cameroon: the Evangelical Church of Cameroon, the Presbyterian Church of Cameroon and the Protestant Church of Africa. They call upon people around the world to “uphold these churches in prayer, to inform themselves about the situation and to call on their national governments to intervene to hold the Cameroonian government accountable, respecting human rights for all. The WCRC calls for the international community to intervene, seeking peaceful, dialogue-based solutions to this challenging historic, social and political issue” (Tanis, 2018).

Recommendation No. 8 (adopted, p. 29)

That the Moderator write to the World Communion of Reformed Churches, commending their actions regarding the situation in Cameroon and offering support from The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Recommendation No. 9 (adopted, p. 29)

That congregations be encouraged to support their brothers and sisters in the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon with prayer for a peaceful way forward so that all may live and learn and work in their language of choice.

Recommendation No. 10 (amended, p. 30)

That the Moderator write to the Canadian Government expressing dismay over the human rights abuses related to language in Cameroon; and that Canada express concern for the situation to the Cameroonian Government, urging it to bring all parties together to engage in meaningful dialogue to seek a peaceful solution.