

MEDIA RELEASE

GLOBAL CAMPAIGN FOR
PEACE AND JUSTICE
IN CAMEROON

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Catholic Bishops Call for Urgent Cameroon Peace Talks

Roman Catholic bishops from around the world are calling on the Cameroon government to hold urgent peace talks with the country's English-speaking separatists and moderates. As violence grows in the central African country, church leaders are urging President Paul Biya to enter negotiations to find a peaceful constitutional settlement that addresses the grievances of the Anglophone community.

Human rights groups report that both the Cameroon armed forces and secessionist militias have terrorized unarmed civilians, burned villages, closed schools and hospitals, and brought the economy to a stand-still in English-speaking regions of the country. The UN estimates that 656,000 Anglophone Cameroonians have fled their homes to avoid the violence, while at least 2,000 people are thought to have been killed.

The bishops have signed an open letter to President Biya, coordinated by the non-partisan Global Campaign for Peace and Justice in Cameroon. The clergymen urge the president, who has been in power since 1982, to join inclusive Swiss-led negotiations aimed at finding a peaceful solution to long-standing Anglophone concerns.

In his 2020 New Year's message, President Biya reaffirmed his determination to defeat secessionist forces using military means. The bishops take no side in the conflict, but they believe there can be no military solution to the current insecurity. Civilians—including Catholic priests—have been kidnapped, and Catholic-run schools and clinics have been forced to close. An estimated 800,000 children are unable to attend school.

The current wave of violence began in 2016 when the Francophone-dominated government imposed French lawyers and teachers on English-speaking courts and schools. However, Anglophone grievances are rooted in a 1961 UN-backed independence referendum that failed to offer English-speaking Cameroonians, who represent 20% of the population, the

chance to form their own country. Especially since 1972, there have been allegations that the Francophone-dominated central government in the capital of Yaoundé has marginalized the mainly Anglophone North West and South West regions.

Responding to international pressure, the Cameroon government held a Major National Dialogue in October 2019. However, the talks were widely boycotted by Anglophone groups, while other members of civil society were unable to attend. The government subsequently granted Special Status to the two Anglophone regions. However, critics argue that the promised increase in autonomy remains loosely defined, with power remaining in the centralized and largely Francophone administration in Yaoundé. Despite the dialogue, the violence is worsening, with an estimated 50,000 people in refugee camps across the border in next-door Nigeria. The text of the open letter is as follows:

Dear President Biya,

We, the undersigned Roman Catholic bishops from across the globe, write to respectfully urge your government to participate in proposed Swiss-led peace talks aimed at ending the violence in Cameroon's North West and South West regions.

We stress that we are impartial. We are motivated by our concern about the suffering of unarmed civilians, and the stability and prosperity of Cameroon. Violence and atrocities on all sides have forced 656,000 Anglophone Cameroonians from their homes, kept 800,000 children from school (including 400,000 from Catholic schools), caused 50,000 people to flee to Nigeria, destroyed hundreds of villages and resulted in a death toll of at least 2,000. Each of these lives is precious, and we mourn their suffering and wish to prevent more loss of life and innocence.

There will be no military victory for any side. A lasting solution to Cameroon's problems must come from a mediated process that includes Anglophone armed-separatist groups and non-violent civil-society leaders. If all parties treat each other as they wish to be treated, a solution is possible.

We applaud the Cameroonian government's Major National Dialogue several months ago. However, it did not stop the violence. We believe the proposed Swiss-led talks offer the best path to an appropriate political solution through inclusive negotiations. The success of these talks will be critical in Cameroon's journey towards ensuring peace and your legacy as an effective leader in a troubled region. It is our sincere hope that all interested stakeholders will join these talks and show a spirit of cooperation, pragmatism, and realism to ensure these negotiations succeed. This is what the people of Cameroon, your sons and daughters, God's children, expect and deserve. Only true peace will allow Catholic dioceses, clinics, and schools to once again minister safely to the blessed congregants and citizens of Anglophone Cameroon.

Yours sincerely,

Bishop Siegfried Jwara, Vicariate Apostolic, Ingwavuma, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Bishop John Keenan, diocese of Paisley, Scotland

Bishop Noel Simard, diocese of Valleyfield, Quebec, Canada

The Most Reverend Charles Hammawa Jalingo, diocese of Tabara State, Nigeria

Bishop Mark Davies, diocese of Shrewsbury, England

Archbishop Peter Loy Chong, archdiocese of Suva, Fiji

Bishop Bart van Roijen, diocese of Corner Brook and Labrador, Canada

Bishop Thomas R Zinkula, diocese of Davenport, Iowa, USA

Bishop Terence Drainey, diocese of Middlesborough, England

Bishop Antonio R Tobias, Emeritus of Novaliches, Philippines

Bishop Albert Thevenot, diocese of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, Canada

Bishop Ray Browne, diocese of Kerry, Ireland

Bishop Jose Cabantan, diocese of Malaybalay, Philippines

Cardinal Soane Patita Mafi, diocese of Tonga, South Pacific

Archbishop Donald Bolen, archdiocese of Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada

Bishop Alphonsus Cullinan, diocese of Waterford et Lismore, Ireland

cc: His Holiness Pope Francis

FURTHER INFORMATION ON THE SITUATION IN CAMEROON

Why does it matter to the rest of the world?

When the international community ignores escalating atrocities of the kind happening in Cameroon, it often ends up paying a massive bill. Sooner or later, we must fund refugee camps and peacekeepers, host negotiations, accommodate thousands of migrants seeking asylum, and then help rebuild shattered nations. It makes more sense to use diplomacy to stop the violence at an early stage, finding a political solution to a political problem through inclusive peace negotiations.

What is happening in Cameroon?

Cameroon, a central African country best known for soccer, is gripped by a conflict between the French-speaking majority (80%) and the historically marginalised Anglophone minority (20%). Grievances boiled over in 2016 when the Francophone-dominated regime of

President Paul Biya imposed French-speaking judges on Anglophone courts, and Francophone teachers in Anglophone schools.

Impartial observers such as the International Crisis Group, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International report that the government is responded to peaceful Anglophone demonstrations with disproportionate force. Its soldiers are burning down English-speaking villages, and the UN estimates 656,000 people have fled into the bush where they live in dire conditions. Two thousand people have been killed, and 50,000 are now refugees in neighbouring Nigeria. There are credible reports of soldiers shooting civilians from helicopters, spraying tear gas at people emerging from Sunday mass, and committing atrocities as they rampage through villages.

The regime's tactics have fuelled secessionist militias which have become increasingly violent. Bandits take advantage of the lawlessness to loot, kidnap, intimidate and kill unarmed civilians and government officials. Anglophone opinion is split: hard-line separatists demand that the English-speaking regions become a new country called Ambazonia; while more moderate Anglophones seek increased autonomy or devolution through a Quebec-style constitutional settlement. Strikes enforced by the Ambazonian secessionist militias have closed businesses and clinics, with an estimated 800,000 children missing out on school for several years.

Representing moderate Anglophone opinion is the Roman Catholic church, which calls on the government to allow a genuine, inclusive dialogue and to investigate attacks on civilians. The bishops warn that a volatile situation may deteriorate further.

Under international pressure, the government held a national dialogue in October 2019. However, few Anglophone leaders could attend, and there was insufficient focus on the roots of the Anglophone crisis. The arrest of Anglophone journalists and opposition figures, and the reported torture of dozens of activists, has fed a lack of trust.

President Biya, in power since 1982, believes military force will defeat the secessionists. Until there is a unified and coherent Anglophone position, he will likely divide and rule. Biya also survives because of his usefulness to the international community: Cameroon is fighting Nigeria's Islamist Boko Haram rebels in its Far North. In addition, the country hosts 350,000 refugees fleeing the violence in the Central African Republic and Nigeria.

Biya is supported by France, which has units of its Foreign Legion stationed around the region. Whereas the British left Africa at independence, the French never did. They remain closely involved in the economic and military life of their former colonies. Cameroon's oil may be off the coast of the English-speaking region, but it is French companies running the rigs.

The background to Cameroon's unrest

Until 1960, there were two Cameroons: the larger territory was administered by France, using the French legal and education systems and language. In the south and west, the British were in charge. At their schools, students spoke English and studied for O and A Levels, and in their courts, English common law was dispensed by English-speaking judges.

In 1961, a referendum asked the inhabitants of British Cameroon if they wanted to join next door Nigeria or French-speaking Cameroon. A third choice – independence – was not on offer. By default, the English-speaking Cameroonians found they were a minority in the new nation. A constitution guaranteeing equal rights was soon disregarded, and the Francophone majority took positions of power in the military and in government. Until recently, only one of 36 cabinet members is Anglophone. And Cameroon long since ceased being a democracy: Amnesty condemns Cameroon's jails ('deplorable'), and the government's track record of having journalists arrested and tortured. The World Justice Project ranks Cameroon as 109th out of 113 countries surveyed, worse than Afghanistan and Venezuela.

What now?

The UN Secretary-General has called for inclusive talks, but as is often the case, the African Union takes no position on the violence beyond mild reprimands. The UK government stands by the disputed referendum that lurks behind Anglophone grievances. Meanwhile, the USA has cut some military aid and removed Cameroon's preferential trade status in response to human rights violations.

A Swiss NGO has proposed inclusive talks to be held in Switzerland, a proposal supported by many Anglophone groups. The Global Campaign for Peace and Justice in Cameroon believes these talks represent the best way forward.

What is the Global Campaign for Peace and Justice in Cameroon?

We are academics and activists who advocate a peaceful resolution of the Cameroon conflict through inclusive and substantive negotiations. We seek a sustainable constitutional settlement, and an end to impunity, while remaining impartial on the core issue of state form. The UK branch is part of an international group, based in Toronto.