



Southern Cameroonians With Disabilities Caught in Crisis

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People with disabilities in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon are caught in the violence and struggle to flee to safety when their communities come under attack. They also face difficulties in getting necessary assistance.

“People with disabilities are among the most marginalized and at-risk population in any crisis-affected country, and Cameroon is no exception,” said Emina Ćerimović, senior disability rights researcher at Human Rights Watch. “The woefully underfunded United Nations humanitarian response exacerbates their risks, as many people with disabilities aren’t getting even their basic needs met.”

Over the past three years, Cameroon’s Anglophone regions have been embroiled in a cycle of deadly violence that has claimed an estimated 2,000 lives and uprooted almost half a million people from their homes. People with disabilities have faced attack and abuse by belligerents, often because they are unable to flee.

On May 13, the UN Security Council discussed the humanitarian situation in Cameroon during an informal meeting. This gave momentum to international efforts to address the crisis and an opportunity to consider practical steps for an effective humanitarian response,

particularly for the most at-risk people. The Security Council should formally add Cameroon to its agenda as a stand-alone item so it can regularly address the crisis and spotlight the dire humanitarian situation in the country, as well as the grave human rights abuses by all sides.

The crisis in the Anglophone regions began in late 2016, when teachers, lawyers, and activists, who had long complained of their regions' perceived marginalization by the central government, took to the streets to demand more recognition of their political, social, and cultural rights. The ruthless response of the government forces, who killed peaceful protesters, arrested leaders, and banned civil society groups, escalated the crisis. Since then, numerous separatist groups have emerged calling for the independence of the Anglophone regions and embracing the armed struggle. Government forces and armed separatists have both been responsible for serious human rights abuses.

Between January and May 2019, Human Rights Watch interviewed 48 people with disabilities living in the Anglophone regions, their family members, representatives of UN agencies, and national and international humanitarian organizations to investigate how the crisis in the North-West and South-West regions has disproportionately affected people with disabilities.

People with disabilities and older people have been among those killed, violently assaulted, or kidnapped by government forces and armed separatists. Soldiers from the Rapid Intervention Battalion killed a 43-year-old man with hearing and intellectual disabilities in the village of Ntamru, North-West region, on May 5, when he did not answer their questions. "He was shot in the head and the chest," a witness told Human Rights Watch.

Destruction of homes and property has an increased effect on people with disabilities. Throughout the crisis, Human Rights Watch has documented numerous cases of people with disabilities whose homes were burned by the security forces, leaving them without accessible home environments, shelter, and assistive devices, and forcibly displacing them.

A 41-year-old man with a physical disability said he lost his wheelchair after soldiers burned his home in Kumbo, North-West region, on December 3, 2018: "My house was razed. I was lucky I could escape thanks to a friend who carried me. But I lost everything, including my wheelchair, and now I have no means to move myself around independently."

During some attacks, people with mobility difficulties could not flee with their families. A 27-year-old woman, with paralysis in her left leg as a result of childhood polio, said she remained alone in her village, Esu, North-West region, in March 2018: "Following three days of clashes and non-stop gunfire, my parents fled and left me home alone. I sought refuge in a nearby house, but the neighbors left too. My family thought it was safer for me to remain and hide, instead [of] to carry me and run. But I felt really scared."

People with disabilities who have managed to flee the violence struggled to get basic humanitarian assistance in the areas to which they are displaced. More than a quarter of Cameroonians who require humanitarian assistance live in the Anglophone regions, including over half a million people who remain internally displaced. The 2019 UN humanitarian response plan for Cameroon is only 21 percent funded.

The UN secretary-general said in this year's report on the protection of civilians that the Security Council should ensure effective protection and assistance for people with disabilities. And on June 20, the Security Council adopted a resolution, calling on UN member states and parties to armed conflict to protect people with disabilities in conflict situations and to ensure they have access to justice, basic services, and unimpeded and inclusive humanitarian assistance.

Over 4 million people have been affected by the crisis in the Anglophone North-West and South-West regions, but there is limited data on the needs of people with disabilities. This data is essential to guide humanitarian efforts reflecting the realities of all civilians.

"The UN and its member states should deliver on their commitments to prevent violence against all civilians, including those with disabilities, and to ensure an inclusive and accessible humanitarian response," Čerimović said. "Meaningful consultation with, and participation of, people with disabilities is essential to understanding the risks and improving protection."

Attacks on People With Disabilities

Since the beginning of the crisis in late 2016, Human Rights Watch has documented at least 20 cases in which government forces killed people with disabilities as they struggled to flee attacks, or because they were left behind. Human Rights Watch has also reported on cases of people with disabilities attacked or kidnapped by armed separatists.



Ebai Rose Deba, 31 years old, has a physical disability and was forced to flee her village in the South-West region of Cameroon in February 2019 following violence.

A 27-year-old man with intellectual disabilities was shot dead at a gas station by gendarmes in Ndu, North-West region, on December 24, 2018. "He was walking, the gendarmes stopped him and started talking to him," a witness said. "Since he was always laughing each time a person spoke to him, he started laughing at the gendarmes, and they got angry. They shot him and drove off. He was shot in the head and the chest; he died instantly."

Government forces have also physically assaulted, harassed, and threatened people with disabilities during security operations searching for armed separatists.

In January 2019, gendarmes, policemen, and soldiers arrested a 24-year-old man with an intellectual disability in Tobin village, North-West region, after firing live ammunition into his home. His father said:

I was sitting in the veranda when two bullets almost hit me. The security forces then came in, said they were looking for separatists, and took my son without any explanation.

The police detained him in Kumbo police station for three days before his father secured his release: “When I took him out, I found that he had bruises on his forehead and feet. I suspect that he was beaten in detention.”

Soldiers raided the home of a 28-year-old woman with a physical disability in Meluf village, North-West region, in December 2018. She told Human Rights Watch that about 15 soldiers broke into her home, took her phone and medications, and ordered her at gunpoint to remove her artificial leg: “They watched me crawling and laughed. They asked me where the Amba [separatists] lived and I replied that I didn’t know. Since they seized my medication, I have been ill.”

People with disabilities have also been abused at checkpoints controlled by the security forces or at roadblocks manned by separatists. Often, they are traveling because they have been displaced by violence. After the military burned the home of a 41-year-old man with a physical disability in Kumbo, North-West region, in December 2018, a soldier stopped the taxi in which he was riding at a checkpoint in Jakiri, North-West region, on January 19, 2019, and beat him:

I had to get out of the car by crawling with my hands, then a soldier hit me badly with his gun on my right arm. The soldier said that I was escaping because I am a collaborator of the Amba [separatists].

A 43-year-old woman with a physical disability described how she was ridiculed by policemen at a checkpoint in Nsoh, North-West region, in May 2018:

The policemen were standing in a queue. The first checked ID cards, the second held a rope high across the road [as a form of barricade] and the other two collected money from drivers. When I presented my ID card and went ahead to the police holding the rope, he mocked me and told me in French: “I want you to jump over this rope.” His colleague told him to leave me alone because of my disability, but the policeman asked me to jump four more times, before giving up and insulting me because I am Anglophone.

Fleeing Violence

People are often forced to flee areas when violence starts. For people with disabilities, especially those with mobility and visual impairments, fleeing attacks often puts them at higher risk than others fleeing.

A 27-year-old man with a physical disability from Guzang, North-West region, said that he had to run away from his village when gendarmes attacked it on October 30, 2018, and destroyed his shop:

I encountered a lot of difficulties while fleeing because I had to support my pregnant wife and my two-year-old child. Before getting a car, we had to walk for two kilometers through the bushes. As I use a crutch, it was impossible for me to carry any luggage, so I left empty-handed, with only the clothes I wore.

A 24-year-old blind student traveled without any support to Bamenda, about 100 kilometers, from his house in Meluf, North-West region, on December 3, 2018, when soldiers burned his house. He said:

Not only did I lose everything, including my school certificates, but I had to escape by myself, because I am orphan. I was very scared during the journey, because I can't see around me, I can't see the danger coming.

Many had to rely on relatives or friends, when they could, to carry or guide them to escape violence.

A 37-year-old single mother with a physical disability and no assistive device struggled to flee to the woods outside Etoko, in the South-West region, after it was raided by the security forces searching for separatists in May 2018:

Everyone ran, and I panicked because I couldn't go as fast as others. I had to use a small tree branch as a walking cane to support myself and move faster. My sister walked at my pace to help me. We spent three days in the bushes, sleeping on the ground, with no food.

Those who carried or helped people with disabilities were also put at heightened risk during their flight to safety.

A 32-year-old woman who takes care of her 11-year-old nephew with developmental and physical disabilities said that she was in Bambili village, North-West region, when clashes between security forces and separatists broke out on February 10, 2019:

It was on the eve of the celebration of the national youth day and there was shooting during a violent confrontation between the army and the Amba [separatists] because the Amba intended to disrupt the celebration. We ran away. I had to carry my nephew on my back and walk for one hour before finding a taxi. It was difficult because I was slow.

The mother of a three-year-old boy with physical and developmental disabilities said that she fled her village, Benakuma, North-West region, following repeated clashes between separatists and security forces in July 2018 and that she contemplated leaving her son behind:

We walked for one day. Then we took a bus to Bamenda. My son was becoming weaker and I feared he might die. My duty as a mother is to ensure his welfare by staying with him. But [at times] I felt I could have carried more luggage instead of carrying him. I felt like he was a burden. He slowed us down and forced us to leave most of the useful things home.

A key challenge in escaping for people with disabilities was the absence of assistive devices such as wheelchairs, sticks, or crutches, which were lost in the chaos, destroyed, or looted.

A 26-year-old man said his artificial leg was broken while he fled into the forest following clashes between separatists and soldiers in his neighborhood in Mile 1, Kumba, South-West region, in early October 2018:

Soldiers and separatists were fighting and there was gunfire, so I had to leave. I couldn't run fast because of my disability. I entered the forest and walked for hours till my artificial leg broke. I took it off and left it there. Since then, I walk on crutches.

Left Behind

Most of the people with disabilities interviewed said that their relatives took them to safety when their communities were attacked. However, some said that their relatives or caretakers were not able to take them along. Others said that they told their relatives and neighbors to run away without them, fearing that their presence would slow the others down or endanger them.

A 19-year-old blind man who fled his village, Baba I, North-West region, following clashes between the military and the separatists in late October 2018, said that he stayed in his village for two days as his family ran away:

There was heavy gunfire. I was home alone and hid in a room. I could hear people shouting. I think I was abandoned because it would have been difficult to guide me during the flight. I could have exposed my family to more danger.

A 25-year-old student with a physical disability from Bekora village, South-West region, was left behind in his home as his community came under attack on October 6, 2018:

I was in the toilet when the military entered our village chasing out the separatists. There was intense shooting. My cousins could not trace my whereabouts, so they ran and abandoned me. I remained in the toilet for about 4 hours because I could not run and for fear of being caught by a stray bullet. When the shooting stopped, I went to the woods to meet my family.

A 5-year-old blind child was left in his house in Ajayukndip village, South-West region, during an attack carried out by soldiers on January 14, 2019. His father said:

That morning my wife and I went to the farm and left the child with his elder brother who is only 11 years old. The military invaded the community and my 11-year-old boy ran away, leaving the child alone. The child attempted to run, but he fell in a pit toilet. Luckily, he was still alive when we found him.

Homes Burned

Security forces, including soldiers, members of the Rapid Intervention Battalion, and gendarmes, destroyed and looted hundreds of homes across the Anglophone regions. People with disabilities often lost everything, their accessible homes, assistive devices, and their livelihoods.



Egbe Aron Ayuk, 62 years old, has a physical disability and was forced to flee his village in the South-West region of Cameroon following clashes between armed separatists and security forces.

Fifteen of the 45 people with disabilities interviewed said that security forces burned their properties. A 37-year-old woman with mobility difficulties said that her home was burned when armed separatists clashed with the security forces in her village, Etoko, South-West region, in July 2018:

The separatists ran toward my house and the army chased them there. The soldiers broke into my place and set it on fire. I escaped into the forest where I spent two days with no food, lying on the ground and covering my head out of fear. I lost my house and the stick I used to walk with.

A 66-year-old man with a visual disability from Ekona, South-West region, said his house was torched by the gendarmes on October 6, 2018:

The gendarmes came and started burning houses. We had to flee and sleep in the bush for days. When we came back, we found that our home had been burned down with everything

inside, food, clothes, medicines, documents... I have worked hard my whole life to give a shelter to my family, but now we're homeless and beg for food. Because I'm blind it's not easy for me to rebuild what we've lost.

On rare occasions, some security forces spared people with disabilities who had been left behind.

A 31-year-old woman with a physical disability said that she could not run away when soldiers arrived in her village Ogomoko, South-West region, on February 15, 2019:

The military came and started arresting people suspected of belonging to separatist groups. I was afraid they could take me too. Since my son was killed on March 3, 2018 by a stray bullet fired by the gendarmes near Afab village, I am afraid of the military. But this time, a soldier entered my home and said it was not safe for me to stay around, he said many old people and people with disabilities had been burned alive in their homes, so he helped me escape.

The soldiers also spared her house and did not burn it down.

Accessing Aid for Internally Displaced People

Life for internally displaced people is difficult, and displaced people with disabilities face additional difficulties in getting assistance and meeting their basic needs such as for food, sanitation, and health care.

Only 9 of the 45 people with disabilities interviewed had humanitarian assistance. In all these cases but one, aid was distributed by local charities in urban centers. Displaced people taking shelter in isolated areas have little to no access to aid because of security issues.

Humanitarian workers in Cameroon said that there are huge gaps in the aid coverage. "It's a drop in the ocean," said one UN employee based in the South-West region. "There are large swathes of the Anglophone regions where the crisis has hit the local population hard, but where aid organizations are yet to deliver anything."

The situation is easier in urban areas. However, even in cities like Buea or Bamenda, displaced people with disabilities who are hosted by local families find it hard to adapt or to get services. All displaced people with disabilities interviewed described severe overcrowding and difficulty getting to water and sanitation facilities.

A 66-year-old blind man who left his village, Ekona, South-West region, said that living conditions in Buea, where he is staying, are difficult:

We are eight in a room; we sleep all together. There is no privacy, the space is narrow, and we can hardly move. To access the toilet, I need to go through some steps, which is very hard for someone like me who cannot see.

A 25-year-old man with a mobility disability from Bekora village and now living in Buea explained that he is staying with six friends in a small room. He explained that in the

absence of being carried or having an accessible environment, he must use his hands to get around:

The biggest challenge is the toilet. It's outside and is used by many people, so it is often disgusting. I am afraid I will soon get some disease since I must creep to the toilet with my hands. Because of the overcrowding and non-accessibility, I am forced to bathe in the middle of the night or very early in the morning.

Needs of people with disabilities affected by the crisis are significant and can be very specific but are not always integrated in humanitarian planning. A protection officer working for an international nongovernmental group in the South-West region said that while there is some assistance for people with disabilities there are no specific programs to respond to their needs and in particular there are not enough services like rehabilitation, assistive devices, and accessible information available. She said: "During the early stage of the project, there's usually a sense of urgency, a rush to intervene which can leave important considerations about needs of people with disabilities out."

International aid organizations operating in displacement areas in the Anglophone regions all said they have no targeted programs to respond to the rights and needs of displaced people with disabilities.

Stigma and Discrimination

Communities hosting displaced people have generally shown solidarity and welcomed into their homes people who fled the violence. However, people with disabilities have faced stigma, leaving them stranded in areas where they fled. An employee of a local charity in Bamenda said that some potential hosts will not accept a family because they do not want someone with a disability in their home. "Unfortunately, there are cultural beliefs shaping local understanding of disability and resulting into discrimination, which should be tackled with more awareness-raising activities," she said.

A 36-year old mother of a child with a developmental disability said that she was stranded in Bamenda when she arrived there in November 2018 after fleeing her village, Bali Bawock, North-West region: "I had so many problems in carrying [my child] on my back when we fled for safety. There is too much stigma on persons with disabilities. No one wants to host a child who drools all the time and still uses diapers at the age of 7. People reject us." The mother and her child now live with her sister and others in Bamenda and get support from a local rehabilitation facility to help them access health care and education.

A volunteer from a local organization providing services to people with disabilities in the South-West region said: "People in Cameroon have negative perceptions about disability. Many think disability is a curse resulting from evil spirits. Others think persons with disabilities are useless. Due to these perceptions, people don't want to help or mingle with persons with disabilities."

A 27-year-old blind student said that thanks to help from a kind woman, he managed to flee to Bamenda when clashes between security forces and separatists erupted in his village Tobin, North-West region, in September 2018. While the two days of walking through the forest were very difficult, it has not become much easier in the city:

Here in Bamenda I don't have a place to stay, I sleep where the night meets me. It's difficult, I am displaced. I have no friends or family to rely on, and generally people don't like to have a disabled person around, so if you are blind or deaf or on crutches, no one will welcome you home. I often struggle to find a shelter.

The crisis in the Anglophone regions has exacerbated an already difficult situation for people with disabilities. "People with disabilities have always faced challenges in all aspects of life," an official of a network of organizations supporting people with disabilities in the South-West region said. "Even prior to this crisis, they found it difficult to access basic services, including education, employment, and health care. They also suffered from discrimination."

Access to Health Care

Access to health care has been disrupted in the Anglophone regions. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimates that 40 percent of health facilities in both the North-West and South-West regions are not operational. Human Rights Watch has documented numerous attacks against medical facilities and health workers since December 2018. According to Médecins Sans Frontières, 61 healthcare facilities and 39 medical professionals have been attacked since May 2018, depriving people of access to medical care, often when they need it the most.

A representative of a network supporting people with disabilities in the South-West region pointed out that people with disabilities have struggled to access health care since the violence started:

Even prior to this crisis, people with disabilities had less access to healthcare services. The crisis exacerbated an already bad situation. Hospitals have been destroyed or ransacked, medical staff threatened or killed. Many doctors have also fled because of the violence.

Culled from Human Rights Watch