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Cameroon's Far North: Responding to Boko Haram

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Executive Summary

- **Nigeria-origin radical Islamist group Boko Haram extended armed attacks into northern Cameroon in 2014 but was substantially beaten back by joint Cameroonian, Chadian and Nigerian armed forces in early 2015; thereafter, it has waged an asymmetric campaign of bombings, largely targeting civilians in urban areas.**
- **The Cameroonian government response to the conflict has focused on militarising the Far North Region, closing border crossings, and concentrating displaced persons in and around urban centres. There is significant distrust between the Cameroonian military and northern Muslim populations, and numerous recorded instances of human rights abuses linked to counter-terrorism operations there.**
- **The violent conflict has exposed the very thin state presence in Far North, which is Cameroon's poorest region, resource stressed and vulnerable to drought and desertification of the Sahel and Lake Chad. Disruption of internal and cross-border trade and seasonal migration to Nigeria and Chad has further diminished livelihood opportunities.**
- **Security forces currently exclude humanitarian actors from the most vulnerable areas of Far North Region. A more joined-up approach to stabilising the Region should include: greater civil-military cooperation to expand humanitarian space; the re-opening and securing of trade corridors; linking voluntary return of displaced persons to state commitments to restore and extend basic services; and a commitment to community reintegration.**
- **Overall, the acute situation in Far North Region is linked to a wider crisis of responsive institutions across Cameroon. The political vacuum**

expected to succeed octogenarian president Paul Biya, sooner rather than later, is widely cited as a greater threat to human security than the immediate Boko Haram insurgency.

"With Boko Haram, we joined your club," mused Mdjiyawa Bakari, the governor of Cameroon's Far North Region (*Extrême-Nord*), when we met at his home in Kousseri. The 'club' consists of liberal democracies bound by a common dilemma: defeating terrorist insurgencies at home while respecting the laws of war, including civic and human rights. From his veranda we gazed across the Logone River at the dusty skyline of N'djamena, capital of Chad. I was visiting to understand exactly how civilians were coping with the threat—forced displacement, pervasive suspicion of strangers, neighbours, even friends, and a near collapsed economy – posed by this West African affiliate of the Islamic State to this most peripheral region of Cameroon. "Asymmetric war means an invisible enemy playing by other rules," he continued. "It's turned our lives upside down."

After Nigeria's Borno State, with its consistent media coverage and relatively well-funded relief effort, Cameroon, Niger and Chad are experiencing the spread of Boko Haram, Ansaru and other extremist splinter groups onto their soil, but with little news coverage or aid response. From August 2014, spillover into Far North Region by combatants and fleeing Nigerians sparked a ground campaign from the Cameroonian military, supported from January 2015 by a multi-national joint task force from Lake Chad Basin countries, overseen by the African Union (AU). This 2014-15 ground war gave way to asymmetric operations by Boko Haram involving remote detonation and suicide bombings in areas of high population density, creating panic and

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sewing mistrust and suspicion between citizens, who are now quick to accuse others of complicity.

In the Far North Region alone, Boko Haram carried out at least 200 attacks between July 2015 and July 2016, including 38 suicide bombings that killed more than 470 people. January 2016 was the worst month, with at least nine suicide attacks killing over 60 civilians. More recent bombers have often been women passing through local markets, schools and town centres on foot or motorcycle.

The militarisation of northern Cameroon

Perceptions of the insurgency reflect political divergences in-country. Many southern Cameroonians see their northern Muslim compatriots as abetting Boko Haram's threat to the 35-year presidency of Paul Biya, undermining national stability. Specifically, a large majority of Cameroonian military officers view the insurgents as an internal mobilisation by their northern compatriots; some also allege the support of the French government in a plot to oust Cameroon's current leadership. To some extent, this is a perpetuation of institutional distrust within the military since a mid-1980s purge of northern Muslim officers perceived to be loyal to Biya's predecessor, Ahmadou Ahidjo (1960-82). Some northern civil society actors speculate on Boko Haram's possible designs on northern areas of the Central African Republic controlled by the Séléka rebel group, and therefore welcome Cameroon's robust military response.

Authorities in Yaoundé, Cameroon's jungle capital some 800km to the south, have responded by strengthening the presence of security forces across the Far North. At least 2,000 troops of the expanding *Bataillon d'Intervention*

Rapide (BIR, an elite force of US- and Israeli-trained commandos) are deployed alongside regular units of the army to protect the region's borders and main road axis. Police and gendarmerie units are also active across the region, often deployed alongside the BIR or regular army units during search and seize operations against suspected Boko Haram sympathizers. Latterly, a US military base for surveillance drones has been set up at the Cameroon Air Force base at Garoua, just to the south.

A more multidimensional stabilisation initiative will be needed to restore state authority and public services once security allows, but many authorities are doubtful that traditional military tactics can deter or vanquish asymmetric tactics. "We must get used to this," said local leaders in Kousseri and Mora. But such resignation is not the official view, and national authorities claim to have recaptured 80 percent of areas under Boko Haram control, freed thousands of captives and prevented multiple attempted attacks on civilians.

Yet the shift to asymmetric combat is outpacing the state's ability to adapt, react and prevent, and the rate of attacks is increasing along the Nigeria border and in large towns where the displaced are concentrated. The influx of strangers has infused urban anonymity with intense mutual suspicion, a fear of crowds and possible explosions. A coordinated series of attacks last November in Mora and Fotokol reminded residents that northern Cameroon remains a battleground, and dispelled the viewthat reported enemy losses were resulting in growing normalisation.

Conflict exposes thin state presence and poor public services

Multiple historical and structural factors are converging to enable the spread of Boko Haram inside Cameroon. With almost four million inhabitants, the Far

North Region is the country's most populous, and hosts its largest Muslim concentration. Unlike Nigeria, where the population is split fairly evenly between Muslims and Christians, only about one-fifth of Cameroon's 24 million citizens follow Islam. Well-documented poverty levels and service inadequacies in the Far North exceed the rest of the country, and translate into poor social and economic outcomes, high inequality, perceived social injustice, low accountability and lack of state legitimacy. The list of grievances is long, and while they've not hardened into armed resistance or extremist ideology in the Far North, they help explain instances of complicity with a foreign extremist group.

For the average resident, state responses to terror translate into low human security and few trade opportunities, due to border closures and strict prohibitions on vehicle circulation. The high concentration of displaced persons in and around urban centres accelerates basic resource depletion (water, timber) and contributes to environmental degradation. In terms of under-served populations, number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and paucity of infrastructure, the remote districts (*arrondissements*) within Logone et Chari département north of Waza National Park are the most critical; here the number of displaced in 2016 rose from 110,000 in June-July to over 150,000 in August. As of January 2017 the Far North Region hosted over 191,000 IDPs, 23,000 unregistered refugees, and 35,000 returning Cameroonians from Nigeria.

Outside large towns in contested areas where the state is not present or reliant on traditional leaders, it is geography, ethnicity and ecology that determine community survival. Geographically, the Far North Region is a 350 km-long finger of savannah separating Nigeria from Chad, just 22 km wide at its

narrowest point. Historically, local commerce was dominated by long-standing transhumance patterns adapted to Sahel ecology, grazing and watering areas around Lake Chad, shared by neighbouring countries (Niger-Nigeria-Cameroon-Chad) along the twelfth parallel. Commercially these pastoral movements are distinct from trade practices in the southern half of the Far North Region below Waza National Park, and from the rest of the country. Border closures and insecurity have interrupted these routes for herding communities, crowding them into agricultural areas and sparking tension.

Given the militarised environment and weapons trade, these clashes are increasingly armed and violent. Northern Cameroon is one of the traditional routes for Peul (Fulani) pastoralists from Nigeria to Chad, the Central African Republic and northern regions of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Traditional arrangements such as accepted transhumance corridors for periodic safe passage have been agreed, but ethnic pastoralist groups are a minority and not well represented in the political and administrative system. When in conflict with farmers, herders tend to prevail, since they can quickly turn their capital (cattle) into cash. However, the balance of power is shifting with increasing militarisation, and pastoralists use weapons to avenge cattle theft, raising the number of casualties during disputes. This has also been documented in Nigeria in recent years.

Besides tensions between the displaced and their host communities over scarce resources, ongoing violence and insecurity have also fuelled long-standing grievances between Far North Region's four dozen ethnic communities, including between non-Muslim Kirdis and Muslim Peuls, between the socially marginalised Kanuri (who dominate in Nigeria's neighbouring Borno State) and the more powerful Peuls, or between 'foreign' Arabic-speaking

Choas (or Shuwa Arabs, often viewed as Chadians) and indigenous, more dominant Kotokos.

While still isolated, recruitment of Cameroonian youth by Boko Haram is reportedly forced or, when voluntary, is motivated by economic gain rather than solidarity. Kanuri youth are a particular target due to cross-border cultural, familial, and economic ties, but Boko Haram now recruits young adults from many different communities. Fear of recruitment or violence motivates households to migrate, putting families in a more vulnerable economic and social situation and, paradoxically, making them easier targets of forced recruitment.

Finally, the Far North is particularly vulnerable to land degradation, lake shrinkage and land-related conflict. Increased aridity and poor water management have contributed to desertification and the cyclical contraction of Lake Chad. This has affected fishing in the area, once a key livelihood. Displaced families compete for resources with host communities, and livelihood-driven migration can fuel disputes across borders. Land degradation and drought leads to flooding during the shorter but heavy rainy seasons, which combined with poor access to safe drinking water and sanitation sees the spread of cholera and other waterborne diseases. Desertification motivates migration to urban or nearby rural areas, putting more pressure on remaining arable land. A similar process is at work in the country's other arid regions (the North, Adamawa), where arable land is scarce due to rocky and mountainous geography.

Socio-economic costs of asymmetric war

The contrast between Logone et Chari and the *départements* below Waza National Park is stark and immediate. South of Waza between Mora, Mokolo and Maroua, communications and transport infrastructure are functionally adequate, allowing the southern sub-region to remain connected commercially and politically to the rest of Cameroon. This ensures a minimum of trade despite closed borders with Nigeria. Not so for the remote *arrondissements* around Lake Chad, far north of Waza and Kousseri, where traders formerly dependent on Nigeria now have only N'djamena and the vacant Chadian border for commerce.

As state forces patrol border areas and volunteer vigilante groups protect traditional and religious leaders in rural areas, a siege mentality has set in and paralysed traditional livelihoods and trade. Circulation by UN agencies and international NGOs is restricted to major towns with no access to rural areas. Closing borders to deprive Boko Haram of supplies, particularly fuel, is leaving youth unemployed and desperate for cash. Many report a trend of armed bandits attacking villages and vehicles in the name of Boko Haram. An Imam from Fotokol described a recent pillage, "victims recognised our sons from the village among the assailants." This was not complicity but opportunism. A Sultan in Mora, where four were killed in a market suicide bomb weeks before, shared his view on border closures: "It leaves youth without work, so they collaborate as informants and fuel smugglers."

The population generally tolerates the army's aggressive stance toward suspected local collaborators and sleeper cells, but rights groups have documented and decried the army's hardline tactics. These include cellular/internet blackouts and unexplained deaths of suspects in detention. The governor was aware of the abuse claims, but rationalised them in the

asymmetric context. "Winning against terrorists means beating them at their own game," he said. "Which we can't do, because we're bound by laws." Local NGO leaders see the BIR as treating civilians as badly as the enemy, and emphasized that the destitution created by restrictions on trade and mobility may explain instances of terrorist collaboration as economic survival. This complicity born of economic desperation evinces the psychosocial trauma of asymmetric war, which many believe exceeds the more direct terror inflicted by Boko Haram itself.

UN officials describe the absence of any joined-up approach between state security and humanitarian actors as "coexistence, not cooperation." The army doesn't allow aid agencies to access zones they claim to control nor, paradoxically, will they assure safety for families seeking to return to their farms and homes. The result is barely a Pyrrhic victory: a bottomed out regional economy and sporadic violence sufficient to scatter the rural farming base, accelerating a widespread *exode rural*. Now young men on bicycles are reduced to risking arrest, or worse, by sneaking 20 liters of fuel toward the border in the dead of night.

As of late 2016 the Cameroonian military had reduced the Far North's restricted 'red zone' along the Nigerian border to 15km inland, down from 50km in 2015. These territory gains have in theory opened up formerly no-go areas for the restoration of local authority and public services, all critical elements of long-term stabilisation. Given the ongoing threat of lone wolf attacks, authorities are not declaring these areas safe for return. By not collaborating with the UN and NGO presence, some aid officials speculate, the army can avoid scrutiny of their treatment of civilians in hostile areas.

The asymmetric threat is most pronounced in urban centres where IDPs amass for safety in numbers. Following the crowd and concerned for their safety, relief operations are concentrated in these same urban areas. This concentration of assistance creates an aid magnet sure to have its own negative consequences. The urban displaced are largely people of relative means. Subsistence farmers and the cashless poor do not come to towns but sleep rough near military posts on the road between Mora and Kousseri, walking as much as 25km to tend their fields. Aid agencies cannot reach these communities, nor those in remote, potentially hostile areas, resulting in a blinkered analysis of displacement dynamics and humanitarian needs across the region.

Policy and programming considerations

Despite decades of neglect by central government, a disruptive insurgency and weak public institutions in the Far North Region, citizens identify strongly with the Cameroonian state. Their grievances are many but have not hardened into opposition against Yaoundé, nor translated into support for extremist agendas coming from Nigeria or the wider Sahel region. There is much the government can do now to restart trade, assist the displaced and the families hosting them, and restore public services in areas safe for return.

1. Civil-Military cooperation to increase humanitarian space. The moment is propitious for a major operational shift toward greater synergy, coordination and collaboration between the UN system and its state and military counterparts across the Far North Region. This shift would translate concretely into greater humanitarian space, meaning more direct access and mobility for relief agencies, currently with limited ability to deliver assistance to beneficiaries in the most vulnerable areas. Greater humanitarian space would also mean a gradual end to remote management, allowing more direct support

to local authorities as they identify and restore basic services in key areas in advance of voluntary returns.

2. Open and secure limited trade corridors. An open border with Nigeria remains a long-term objective but as territory is gradually secured, local authorities need to return and restore basic services in areas of greatest displacement, creating conducive conditions for a coordinated and voluntary return of affected populations. The quickest way to revive subsistence livelihoods and trade in order to improve quality of life is to open trade corridors at border points approved by authorities in Borno State and Far North Region.

If the border remains closed, repairing feeder roads and providing security for market areas can provide early stimulus to local commerce. Regular movement of joint patrols by UN and local security forces stimulated commerce and eventually flushed insurgents from besieged areas in Ituri (eastern DRC) in the early 2000s, ending their reign of terror over remote communities and halting cycles of forced displacement.

3. Progressive, voluntary returns in tandem with basic public services. Cameroonian forces will never completely secure the long, porous border with Nigeria, including the southern fringe of Lake Chad. The asymmetric threat will persist as long as Boko Haram and its splinter factions are active in the region. A phased, progressive returns strategy should be piloted with military accompanying state authorities to secure areas as basic public services are restored, roads improved (using local labour) and re-connected to commercial centres—classic 'stabilisation' built around 'lily pads' of security.

Controlled border crossings require civilian identification, but lack of birth certificates and voter ID cards among area residents has been problematic since the conflict began. Far North authorities are reluctant to provide IDs to adults without paperwork but children are receiving birth certificates upon confirmation from customary leaders (Sultans, Imams, Lawans/land chiefs, etc.). Without ID, school children cannot enroll and parents are barred from accessing vital IDP registration lists.

4. DDR and community reintegration. We know from years of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) efforts in complex emergencies that when they fail to identify and incorporate the environmental and structural origins of the grievances that triggered militarisation, reintegration programs can yield a host of negative effects, from mass recidivism to mercenaries. In the case of northern Cameroon, it is less a threat of ideological hardening against the state than a crisis of responsive institutions. For not only are political vacuums readily filled by negative forces, but they accelerate popular disenfranchisement and breed grievances that can turn ideological and militant. A joined-up civil-military approach will allow humanitarian actors to follow regional authorities as they return to more secure areas, but secondly it serves as an essential condition for successful community reintegration.

Of the many polls conducted around conditions for voluntary return, IDPs consistently report that physical security (safety plus ability to farm and circulate) is the primary concern, followed by the provision of education and health services in areas of origin. Yaoundé is betting heavily and spending lavishly on the military campaign but ideas around normalising secured areas with a reinforced state presence, services and returnees are not a priority. In this absence, relief agencies and local authorities are considering 'alternatives

to return', and 'semi-permanent integration' scenarios until, presumably, displaced populations will decide to return to their homelands. These eventual returns are attached to no timeline, nor are military performance expectations publicly declared.

5. Locating the Far North in Cameroon's national transition. Yaoundé is at least consistent in conducting its Far North military campaign much as it has handled the region over past decades—no planning, no expectations and little risk. Observing these long-term trends, displaced Imams in Kousseri confided that the region's main threat was not foreign terrorism but the mortality of 84-year-old President Biya, and the corrosive power vacuum his death will create.

Having known only two authoritarian presidents in 57 years, Cameroon is institutionally under-developed and increasingly beset by divisions between Anglophone West and Francophone East, as well as between North and South. The looming post-Biya era is an opportunity for Cameroon to transition to a more responsive and accountable national settlement but with no clear successor, institutional plan or national consensus, the political vacuum is likely to get worse before it gets better.

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