

KLW BRIEFING

Updates for the Coalition for Dialogue and Negotiations

Two Suspected Ambazonia Separatists Killed in Restive South West Region

By Journal du Cameroun | February 09, 2021

Two men believed to be armed separatist kingpins in the South West Region have been killed by elements of the Rapid Intervention Battalion, BIR, sources have confirmed. The two men; Augustine Ambe aka “General Above the Law” and Celestine Wanche aka “T-Boy” were killed early on Monday morning during a military raid on their camp in Mbalangi, in the outskirts of Kumba, Meme Division, South West Region of Cameroon. Their corpses was carried to the 6th BIR sector in Kumba for verification and confirmation before they were later buried. “General Above the Law” operating under the Fako-Meme Black Tar Council is believed to be the brain behind last weeks attacks on the military as well as transport buses in Ediki and Mbalangi. After long periods of relative calm along the Buea-Kumba road, serious fighting was reported between soldiers and suspected armed separatist fighters who blocked the road around the localities of Ediki and Mbalangi though it remains difficult to ascertain the casualties.

Statements on the Passing of Congressman Ron Wright of the 6th Congressional District of the State of Texas

By Coalition for Dialogue and Negotiations | February 08, 2021

Washington DC, London, Berlin - The Coalition for Dialogue and Negotiations extends deepest sympathies



Coalition
for Dialogue and Negotiations

to the family, friends, colleagues, and constituents of Representative Congressman Ron Wright who died February 7, 2021 in Texas at the age of 67.

Congressman Wright’s dedication to human rights will be missed. He was vocal on the human right abuses in the Southern Cameroons and the plight of civilians in the affected communities. Congressman Wright was part of the delegation with Congresswoman Karen Bass who traveled to Cameroon to meet with stakeholders in the country.

As we grieve his passing, the Advisory Board, Steering Committee, and members of the Coalition are united in sorrow and pray for the family, especially for Congressman Wright’s wife, his three children and nine grandchildren as they mourn their loss.

Cameroon Military Says It Has Freed 4, Including 2 Students

By Moki Edwin Kindzeka | February 07, 2021

Two students who were among four civilians freed from a suspected rebel hideout in Cameroon’s English-speaking northwestern town of Bamenda say they were tortured for pursuing an education. The military said Friday four rebels were killed, four others arrested, and huge consignments of weapons seized from rebels fighting to create an English-speaking state in the French-speaking-majority

Cameroon. Cameroon's military says a dozen troops Friday night attacked a separatist camp in Ntanka, an English-speaking village near the northwestern town of Bamenda. Saturday morning, the troops handed over four hostages they had freed to Brigadier Generals Valere Nka and Ekongwesse Divine Nnoko, military commanders fighting separatists in Cameroon's English-speaking Northwest region. Among the freed hostages was a 17-year-old student who identified herself only as Jane. She said she was abducted on her way to school in Bamenda, held in captivity and tortured for a week. Looking tired and hungry, Jane said she and three other hostages did not have enough food and water. The military said two students, a job seeker and a businessman were freed from the abandoned building that served as a separatist camp. One civilian was seriously wounded in crossfire between the troops and fighters. He was rushed to a hospital in Bamenda. No troops were killed or wounded. Four fighters were killed, four arrested and an unknown number, including women, fled to the nearby bush, the military said. Job seeker Anseme Ngwa, 37, said he spent five days in captivity after he was kidnaped from Bamenda. He said the abductors took the telephone numbers of his relatives and called his family to pay a \$1,000 ransom for his release. He said his family could not raise the money and he was taken to the separatist camp where he was beaten with a machete three times every day. Ngwa said he pleaded with his family to bring the requested ransom to Ntanka, but his family instead informed the military. The military said they had the assistance of some civilians who had noticed strange faces in the abandoned house at Ntanka. Several books, school uniforms, pens and pencils could be seen in the house. The military said it was an indication many students have been abducted and held illegally in the building. Deben Tchoffo is the governor of Cameroon's North West region, where Bamenda is. He said children should not fear going to school. He said the military will protect all citizens. Separatists have acknowledged on social media that their fighters, including a commander known as general Lion, were killed in Ntanka but gave no further details.



An abandoned building used by separatists in Ntanka, Feb. 6, 2021. (Moki Edwin Kindzeka/VOA)

Cameroon's Ethno-Political Tensions and Facebook Are a Deadly Mix

By Arrey Elvix Ntui | February 09, 2021

When at least 53 people died in Cameroon in late January after a bus collided with a fuel-laden truck—one of the worst road accidents in the country's history—few observers would have expected that reactions to the tragedy would include ethnic slurs, mainly on Facebook. They were directed toward members of the Bamileke community, from which most of the victims appeared to originate. Cameroon has long prided itself on the relative harmony between the country's approximately 250 ethnic groups, none of which dominates nationally—a diversity that many Cameroonians consider to be a safeguard against communal violence. But Cameroon now has to deal with a new reality. A heavily contested presidential election in 2018 has unleashed a new layer of political tensions that have taken an ethnic turn and found a formidable amplifier on social media. Among the supporters of longtime President Paul Biya and the main opposition leader, Maurice Kamto, many now frame the political dispute that arose from that election as a competition for power between, on the one hand, Biya's Bulu group and the ethnic Beti with whom the Bulu identify, and, on the other, Kamto's Bamileke community. If allowed to further deepen its roots, this increasingly ethnic acrimony could lead to violence and threaten the stability of a country already facing a separatist insurgency in its Anglophone region. Cameroon's social fabric could then be torn apart, especially as both sides position themselves for the eventual end of Biya's presidency. He will turn 88 next week, after nearly four decades in power. A rash of communal violence in a southern town in October 2019 gave Cameroon a taste of what could come if the genie is not swiftly put back in the bottle. To avoid reaching the point of no return, Biya's government and the opposition should engage in meaningful dialogue about electoral reforms, while the government should also strengthen the country's laws against ethnic discrimination.

Facebook, the most popular social media platform in Cameroon, has a role to play, too—by increasing its capacity to identify and remove inflammatory content on its platform. The ethnic cleavages originate in the rivalry between the ruling party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement, known by its French acronym

RDPC—which firmly intends to keep the upper hand whenever Biya’s presidency ends—and opposition leaders ambitious for power, Kamto most prominently. The 2018 election, considered by many observers as riddled with irregularities and whose results are still being contested by the opposition, stoked further political division. Since then, Kamto’s Cameroon Renaissance Movement, or MRC, has boycotted parliamentary and regional elections in 2020 and condemned Biya’s management of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Anglophone crisis. The opposition also wants to see the government undertake some electoral reforms before any future election. This wish notably emanates from a fear that Biya could die or resign before the end of his term, in 2025, leading to snap elections that the ruling party would be better able to control under the current, compromised electoral system. Despite warnings from influential figures and institutions, like Cameroon’s Catholic bishops more than a year ago, the power struggle between the RDPC and the MRC is now increasingly aligned with ethnic affiliations—a situation only made worse by the use of social media by both politicians and the public.

While the rise of social media has been a welcome boost for free speech in a country where government-controlled outlets occupy most of the media space, it has also had some destabilizing effects. The platforms, and especially Facebook—the most popular social media platform in Cameroon, with close to 4 million users—are now used to spread ethnic stereotypes, exchange ethnic-based insults, propagate misinformation and even incite violence. That is all widening the divide between the two sides. In the southern town of Sangmelima, such increased divisions seem to have played a role in riots that erupted in late 2019, when Indigenous Bulu targeted Bamileke and Bamoun groups originating from Cameroon’s West Region. Underlying tensions over land rights in the area, notably for space to open shops—which local Bulu feel locked out of by the other groups—spilled over into violence after a Bamoun man was blamed for the murder of a local motorbike taxi driver. Hundreds of locals then attacked Bamilekes, Bamouns and other Cameroonians from the country’s north with sticks and stones, while also looting and destroying their properties. Hundreds fled back to their region of origin in western and northern Cameroon. The government quickly held intercommunal talks, which managed to calm the situation in Sangmelima. However, the episode is a possible sign of the dangerous path the country is currently embarking on.

As political actors position themselves for the end of Biya’s presidency, there is a risk they will turn to their own ethnic groups when mobilizing support, meaning even more serious ethnic disputes could arise and shatter decades of relative harmony between ethnic communities. Both the ruling party and the opposition have in their ranks people who understand the dangers of this trend toward tribalized politics, and who have voiced their concerns. But neither camp has done much to stem these tensions. The authorities have sounded alarm bells on rising hate speech, run seminars to warn of its potential harm and even passed a new law criminalizing “contempt of tribe,” in December 2018. But the political opposition has greeted these moves with suspicion, suggesting that they are a smokescreen for repressing journalists. Yet since its passage, the law against tribal hate speech, which provides for more stringent punishment for inflammatory language that appears on social media, has yet to be applied in even a single case. There are concerns over when the law will be used and on what basis, given widespread abuse by both sides. Given the opposition’s boycott of the 2020 parliamentary elections, which lost it the opportunity of getting seats in the National Assembly, the ruling party and the opposition have no forum where they can engage on the difficult topic of electoral reforms. Both sides must nonetheless find a way of talking to each other in order to reach agreement on changes to make the process more transparent—perhaps, most importantly, by moving from a multiple ballot vote, which is more open to manipulation, to a single ballot.

Meanwhile, to deal with ethnic tensions, the government should strengthen the legal framework that prohibits ethnic discrimination, notably for access to public service employment. One way to do that might be to better empower a body it created in 2017 to fight this discrimination, but which lacks funding and only has an advisory role. Social media companies have a responsibility, too. Curbing hate speech and disinformation online will not in itself solve the ethnic tensions born out of Cameroon’s political crisis. But it remains key to reduce their reach, and therefore to mitigate the risks of violence. Facebook, in particular, should improve its own capacity to identify and remove fake content and content that incites violence, including by hiring moderators familiar with the particularities of Cameroonian hate speech and linguistic nuances. The social media giant should also boost its outreach to politicians in Cameroon to help them engage with their supporters and tone down the rhetoric online. Biya and his backers may be reluctant to take measures they will perceive as weakening their grip on power. Still, there is reason to hope that the president, at 87, will consider his legacy. With separatist sentiment mounting in the Anglophone areas, the man who has been leading Cameroon since 1982 should be particularly sensitive to preserving the country’s historically amicable interethnic relations.