

## Civilian Protection in Armed Hostilities: An Analysis of the Conflict Situation in the Two English-Speaking Regions of Cameroon.

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**ABSTRACT:** The conflict in the two English-speaking regions of Cameroon has been ongoing since 2016 with some dire consequences felt by the civilian population of the two conflict-hit regions (the Northwest and Southwest regions). These consequences range from the destruction of civilian properties on both sides of the conflict, destruction of means of livelihood of the civilian population, loss of lives and forceful displacement of the affected population as a result of the growing insecurity caused by the conflict. The civilian population suffers as a result of the conflict but mostly because of the failure of the state to ensure the respect of international instruments for civilian protection in situations of armed conflicts and guarantee the safety of the non-combatants. International Humanitarian Law asserts that civilians must be protected against all forms of violence in times of war. This however has not been the case with the ongoing conflict in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon, given that the civilian population in the two regions have been receiving the hard end of the stick in the conflict. The civilian population, likewise civilian properties have been the object of attack on both sides of the conflict. The paper analyses the lack of civilian population by the state, how the lack of civilian population affects the non-combatants in the conflict-hit regions. The paper equally analyses the measures and instruments of civilian protection in situations of conflict. The paper goes further to identify the areas of non-compliance to International Humanitarian Law by the parties in conflict. Data was collected through face-to-face interviews with selected civilians in the affected regions and the failure of the state to guarantee civilian protection by the parties in conflict was identified. The paper concluded that the situations of civilians in the two regions continues to deteriorate and the civilian population suffers even more and recommends the effective enforcement of the respect of international legal instruments on civilian protection duly ratified and adopted by the state of Cameroon.

**KEY WORDS:** *conflict, armed hostilities, civilian population, non-combatants, internally displaced persons, civilian protections, International Humanitarian Law.*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Cameroon is a state in the Central African sub-region. In 1884, the country was annexed by Germany who brought the territory under its strict German administration up until 1916 when it was defeated in World War I (Dze-Ngwa, 2015). After the end of World War I and the defeat of Germany, Cameroon was partitioned between Britain and France and Britain obtained the territory known today as British Southern Cameroon (Dze-Ngwa, 2015). In 1946, the territory became a United Nations Trust Territory and in 1922, Britain further partitioned British Cameroon into British Northern Cameroons and British Southern Cameroons and administered both territories as part of Nigeria (Nfi, 2011). When the wave of independence began in Africa with the UN calling on colonial masters to grant independence to their colonies, the reunification question was raised and British Southern Cameroons voted on February 11th, 1961 to join the Republic of Cameroon and on October 1st, 1961, the country became the Federal Republic of Cameroon (Delancey et al, 2010), with two different identities notably, English and French.

Cameroon has been plagued with an armed conflict in its two English speaking regions, notably the Northwest and the Southwest regions for approximately eight years now. A conflict which started in 2016 based on the poor governance of the two main identities in the country, by late 2017, the two regions saw the emergence of a non-state armed group, transforming the situation into an armed conflict with far reaching consequences on the civilian population of the two affected regions. A conflict in which there is the lack of civilian protection and lack of compliance to International Humanitarian Law (IHL).

Conflicts occur in different part of the world and most often than not, they bring untold suffering to the host population. The conflict in the English part of Cameroon is not any different as it has brought about unmeasurable effects on the civilian population. It is the civilian population in the two conflict-hit regions that have felt the dire effects of the conflict and still continue to bare it as this conflict drags on. Two factions are fighting in the Northwest and southwest regions of the country and it is the civilian population that is at the receiving end irrespective of the fact that they are not taking active part in the conflict. The civilian population bares the biggest brunt of the conflict ranging from loss of lives, destruction of civilian properties, the destruction of homes and economic means of survival, the forceful displacement of the population.

This paper centers around the fact that the conflicting parties/belligerent of this conflict locally termed the 'Anglophone conflict' do not respect international standards of warfare given that the greater majority of the civilian population is been caught in the cross-fire and they fall short of any form of civilian protection in the ongoing conflict. Civilian protection consists of the legal and moral obligation of the state and non-state armed groups to safeguard civilians in conflict situation from the effects of the conflict conflicts. This has to do with efforts undertaken by the state and the parties in conflict to ensure the safety of the civilian population in the course of the conflict and calls on the state to punish perpetrators of human rights abuses/violations. The situation of civilians trapped in the conflict-hit Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon is rather dire given that it is the population in the two regions that have been bearing the brunt of the conflict since its escalation in 2017.

International Humanitarian Law (law of war) stresses on the aspect of civilian protection in time of war and the fact that the civilian population must not be an object of attack by belligerents in armed conflicts. Once an armed conflict exists, any action taken for reasons related to that conflict must comply with International Humanitarian Law (Nils, 2019). The undisputed cornerstone of International Humanitarian Law aiming to protect the civilian population from the effects of armed hostilities is the principle of distinction, according to which parties to an armed conflict must at all times distinguish between the civilian population and combatants and between civilian objects and military objectives (Nils, 2019). In the two English speaking regions of Cameroon, the principle of distinction has been largely violated. The conduct of hostilities by the conflicting parties fails to distinguish between civilian properties form military objects and as a result, civilians have been caught in the crossfire. The state military has reportedly killed innocent civilians on multiple occasions since 2021 (Schumann & Willis, 2023) and according to the United States Department of State report (2023) still on the human rights situation in the two conflict-hit regions, there have been deliberate killings civilians by both the separatist fights (the non-state armed group) and the state military. It is on this premise that this paper stresses on the fact that the state of Cameroon which hold the primary responsibility to protect its citizens have considerably failed to do so in its two English-speaking regions. The protection of civilians in armed conflict is a fundamental principle of International Humanitarian Law and states have the primary responsibility to ensure the safety and well-being of their citizens (UN Security Council, 2006). The conflict in the two English-speaking regions of Cameroon which started in 2016 is a stark example of state failure to protect civilians, with reports of human rights abuses, extrajudicial killings and displacement (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

There have been reported cases of acts of terror carried out against civilians and civilian necessities in the two regions by both the non-state armed group and the state military for which appropriate action has not been taken to effectively protect the civilian population. As such, the traumatized population has been caught between the state military and the non-state forces (Bang & Balgah, 2022). This aspect has been highlighted by the Additional Protocols to the Geneva conventions (1949), the fact that the civilian population shall not be an object of attack and any act or threat of violence of which the primary purpose is to spread terror among the civilian population is prohibited. This however has been grossly violated by the conflicting parties in the ongoing conflict in the northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon.

For the period between 1<sup>st</sup> January, 2021 and 8<sup>th</sup> December 2023, at least 1,144 security-related incidents coded as battles, explosions/remote violence have been recorded against civilians in Cameroon's Northwest and Southwest regions and of these incidents, 51 percent are coded as incidents with civilian targeting (ACCORD, 2024). This further goes to stress that the nature of hostilities by the conflicting parting in the two English-speaking regions of Cameroon do not respect International Humanitarian Law standards on warfare as well as the fact that the civilian population should not be the object of attack.

The conflict in the two English-speaking regions of Cameroon has resulted in severe humanitarian consequences on the host population characterized by widespread loss of civilian lives, destruction of civilian necessities, violence against the civilian population, mass displacement of the population as well as human rights violations. Despite the legal and moral obligations for civilian protection by the state and parties in conflict in situations of armed conflict as enshrined in International Humanitarian Law, civilian protection remains grossly inadequate and calls for concern in Cameroon. The situation of civilian protection in the ongoing conflict in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon is a staggering example by virtue of the fact that the belligerents in the conflict fail to distinguish between civilian necessities from military objectives in order to priorities civilian safety.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The research methodology adopted in this paper illustrates the procedures with which data was obtained to analyse the state of civilian protection in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon. The methodology in this paper comprises of primary and secondary sources through which data was collected and analysed for better understanding of the issues raised. Primary data was collected mainly through face-to-face interviews conducted with selected civilians in the two conflict-hit regions and field observations conducted by the researcher. As to what concerns secondary sources, the paper gathered from books, reports, journals, articles, television news and news papers. As far as the sampling technique is concerned, the paper made use of the purposive sampling technique, snowballing and simple random sampling to select respondents. A total of eight (8) respondents were selected in the two regions.

The paper adopted the descriptive research design and the main instrument of data collection was direct interviews conducted with the eight selected civilians in the two conflict-hit regions. The purpose of descriptive research served to describe the situation of the civilian population and civilian protection in the regions.

### Respondents Opinion on Issues Raised in the Research

NO	Reponses of Respondents on Issues Raised	Northwest Regions	Southwest Region	Total number of interviews
1	Insecurity and humanitarian effects of the conflict on the civilian population	4	4	8
2	Violation of the right to education by the parties in conflict with their method of warfare	4	4	8
3	Insecurity and socio-economic impact of the conflict on the civilian population	4	4	8
4	Non-compliance to International Humanitarian Law standards of civilian protection by the parties in conflict	4	4	8

Source: *Field survey by researcher 2024.*

The table above shows that a total of eight (8) interviews were conducted in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon and four (4) main issues were raised in this paper. The results of the findings on the responses of respondents on issues raised gathered that there has been a non-compliance to International Humanitarian Law standards on civilian protection in situations of armed conflict. Respondents advanced that the parties in conflict fail to distinguish between civilians and military objects and this has greatly resulted in civilian casualties in both regions. The research equally gathered that the conflict has resulted in acute humanitarian problems and serious security concerns on civilians in the Northwest and Southwest regions. Respondents also advanced that the conflict has been an attack on education by the non-state armed group who have used education as a means to their personal aims. Finally, the findings gathered that due to the lack of civilian protection by the state, the insecurity caused by the conflict has drastically affected the socio-economic wellbeing of the population of the two regions.

The conflict has resulted in largescale civilian suffering, human and material loss. In the fighting between the state military and the non-state armed groups who often apply the guerrilla tactic of hit-and-run, it is the civilian population which is caught in the middle. Properties and civilian lives have been lost on a daily basis as the hostility continues between the parties. The inability of the state ensures the compliance of the parties to a universally adopted law of war and guarantee the protection of civilian has led to a conflict which imposes dire consequences on the population of the two regions. The conflict represents a serious threat to live and security for the civilian population of the conflict-hit regions. This paper presents an analysis on the lack of civilian protection and the effects of the conflict on the population of the Northwest and Southwest regions.

### Insecurity and Humanitarian Effects of the Conflict on the Civilian Population

The most dramatic and visible impact of the conflict has been on been on human lives and displacement of the civilian population (World Bank Group, 2021). Luckham et al (2001) postulate that massive displacement of populations has been the most common consequences of conflicts in Africa, these displacements split up families and communities and destroys the social networks of life of affected population. Valters et al (2014) on the other hand have advanced that security is personal safety from physical threat and the fear of physical threat. In the particular case of the conflict in Cameroon's two English speaking regions the conflicting parties have failed to ensure the physical safety of the civilian population given that the conduct of hostilities on both sides have not been that which distinguishes between non-combatants and military objectives making the impact of the conflict very dire on the civilian population. The conflict has resulted in thousands of dead and hundreds of thousands of displaced persons both internally and externally. The figures of the Human Rights Watch report on the situation in the Northwest and Southwest regions as far as the conflict is concerned stand at least 32,000

persons as refugees in Nigeria most of which are women and young girls (Longari, 2018). The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian affairs in its 2019 report still on the actual situation of civilians in the conflict-hit regions details that at least four million people are directly affected by the conflict, 1.3 million people have been left in need of constant humanitarian support, at least 437,000 persons are internally displaced, about 500,000 in need in host communities. The report further details that more than 1,200 cases of civilian protection rights violations have been registered, mainly involving physical abuse or threats and lack of legal protection and about 3,700 unaccompanied or separated children need urgent assistance and psycho-social care (OCHA, 2019). English-speaking Cameroonians, especially women and children, as a result of the ongoing conflict are without shelter and in desperate need of food, water and basic healthcare assistance since they had to flee their homes due to the lack of civilian protection by the state. The International Crisis Group reports that the conflict in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon is deadlocked. In the last 20 months, the conflict has left 1,850 dead, 530,000 internally displaced and tens of thousands of refugees (ICG, 2019). Government security forces have committed extrajudicial executions, burned properties, carried out arbitrary arrests and tortured detainees (Longari, 2019).

By 2020, the figures on the situational analysis increased to over 900,000 persons who have been internally displaced due to the conflict and an additional 60,000 persons who fled into neighbouring Nigeria for fear of their lives and the staggering lack of protection (Craig, 2020). As of 2021, at least 4,000 civilians had been killed in the Anglophone regions, a toll that surpasses that of the country's Far North region where Boko Haram has been waging an armed campaign since 2014 (Craig, 2021). The effects of the conflict on the Anglophone population abounds with parents watching their children get killed and children watching their parent being helplessly murdered (Eromo, 2018). As many as half a million people have fled their homes in the Anglophone regions since the crackdown on anti-government protests by English-speaking Lawyers and teachers deteriorated into an armed separatist struggle in 2016 (Benita, 2019). The physical devastation of communities continues to increase and the psychological trauma is immeasurable (Miller, 2019). Civilian protection in situations of armed conflicts is a fundamental cornerstone on International Humanitarian Law calling on all parties in conflict to spare and protect all civilians in the event of an armed conflict. However, this has not been the case with the conflict in the two English-speaking regions of Cameroon. When looking at the events on the ground, the lack of civilian protection in this conflict is not due to the lack of awareness of this important legal instrument of war but merely for the fact that the conflicting parties simply fail to comply with this instrument and as such, those who are directly affected by the violence turns to be the civilian population. As a matter of fact, one of the belligerents of this conflict is the state military and the state holds that primary responsibility to ensure the safety and protection of its citizens. Thus, illustrating the failure on the part of the state to ensure the protection of its civilian population in the two conflict hit regions by ensuring that the military respects the basic fundamentals of International Humanitarian Law.

As of 2023, the conflict had affected even more lives and the government still fails to ensure an adequate protection of the civilian population in the two regions. Over 6,000 persons have been killed since the conflict started in Cameroon's two English-speaking regions (International Crisis Group, 2023). Like Joshua Ball (2018) clearly stated, security is the desire for safety or protection. The conflict has forced many English-speaking Cameroonians to flee their regions of origin for fear of their lives and in a bit to stay and find security. Inhabitants in remote areas have reported their fear of going to bed at night and not being able to wake up the following morning. Some have explained that when the shooting starts, the unfortunate civilians could get hit by a stray bullet. This is simply due to the fact that the method of warfare employed in the conflict are not civilian friendly to the population and at the end of the day, it is the civilians who become the object of attack as the conflict drags on. Some of the civilians interviewed highlighted the following concerns;

“Indiscriminate arrests of persons in my area. Constant threat calls from the amba boys demanding for money or a life in return. Insecurity in the Northwest region, I feared for my life”.

“The Anglophone conflict poses a serious problem to peace and security in the Northwest and Southwest regions. There has been high level insecurity in Kumba, students and teachers got massacred in a school in Kumba and their only crime was that they went to school that unfortunate”.

Another non-combatant who was interviewed for this study stated that “the conflict has resulted in high levels of insecurity, the frequent gunshots, the stray bullets, the trauma of seeing people dying on a daily basis”.

There is an increasing need for the state of Cameroon to ensure the respect of International Humanitarian Law by the parties in the ongoing conflict to ensure that the civilian population of the two conflict-hit regions are adequately protected by making them accountable for their methods and the perpetrators of civilian human rights violations get punished accordingly.

### **Violation of the Right to Education by the Parties in Conflict with their Method of Warfare**

The education in the two English-speaking regions of Cameroon is one of the areas where the conflict has directly targeted the civilian population. Bamenjo (2019) conducted a situational analysis of the ongoing conflict and came out with the conclusion that since 2017, a silent humanitarian catastrophe has been unfolding in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon. He noted that the education sector has been severely affected and as of early 2019, over 700,000 children are out of school. The United Nations Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF) in 2019, estimates that over 600,000 children of school going age are not attending school in the English-speaking regions (Bamenjo, 2019). This is due to the failure to by the conflicting parties to avoid attacks that can cause excessive incidental consequences on the civilian population. The outcome of some of these attacks have been the destruction and burning down of schools thereby directly targeting the civilian population and affecting education and learning. States must take the necessary, concrete steps to achieve that full realisation of the right to education even in situations of insecurity and armed conflict (British Institute of International and Comparative Law, 2025). Looking at the situation in the two English-speaking regions of Cameroon, education is one of the areas where the state has failed to ensure the protection of civilians and their right to education and as a result, the conflict has been termed an attack on education.

As of June 2019, at least 4,437 schools were closed down in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon, pushing more than 607,000 children out of school (Mesfin et al, 2020). Forbe et al (2019) contend that education is the sector that has suffered the most from the conflict as the non-state armed group has from the onset used education as a political tool to mount pressure on the state for political reforms. The strategy of enforcing school boycotts by the non-state armed group in some towns and villages in the Northwest and Southwest regions of the country has in turn left thousands of children in the two English-speaking regions out of school. The most recent of this strategy was recorded in September 2024 when schools were due to resume from the summer holidays, a prolonged lock down was called by the non-state forces to stop students from going to school. Kingsley, and internally displaced person who was interviewed for this paper stated that in one of the remote villages in the southwest region, some unfortunate children and teachers were killed because they reported to school during resumption in September 2024 despite the lock down. Armed groups have deliberately prevented children from attending school in the Northwest region as they believe this might assist them in attaining their goals in the region (Bamjjo, 2024).

The ongoing conflict has thus been viewed by many as an attack on education in the affected regions. In 2018 to 2019, there was a drop in the enrolment of boys/girls from 64,224 to 24,604 respectively due to the ongoing conflict (Mokube, 2023). Even though many other sectors of the country have been hit by the conflict, the figures on the education sector are staggering. The government claims the schools which have been destroyed was done by the separatist, but the separatists on the other hand say the military forces destroyed many of them when they found out that they were being used as rebel bases (Maclean, 2019). For over eight years now that the conflict has been ongoing since its outbreak in 2016, the increasing insecurity levels in the two conflict regions caused by the methods of warfare of the conflicting parties have to a large extent, rendered education ineffective in these areas. In some cases, where teachers attempt to open schools and resume education, such schools have been burnt down by the non-state armed group. Before the outbreak of the crisis in 2016, more than 2000 schools were operational in these two regions but as of 2020/2021 just about 189 schools were operational as a result of the conflict which has led to many students boycotting schools (Mokube, 2023). Lockdowns imposed by the non-state armed groups have occurred frequently and schooling has been disrupted in the over three years since the crisis started (Benita, 2019). The conflict drastically affects the lives of children (Miller, 2019). The Geneva Convention of 12th August, 1949 and its Additional protocol I on the issue of protection of education calls on the protection of civilian persons and objects including schools, teachers and students in situations of armed conflict (ICRC, 2010). Education in the two English-speaking regions of Cameroon has been faced with serious challenges with the increasing security concerns as the state fails to enforce the compliance of the conflict parties to this internationally adopted legal instrument on the protection of civilian and civilian objects. Some civilians highlighted some education challenges experienced as a result of the nature of the conflict.

A student of the university who was interviewed stated that, “the conflict has resulted in a disruption of education. Personally, the conflict has greatly affected my education as I can no longer continue with my post-graduate studies at the university”.

Another civilian was interviewed and he stated that “Most children in my village in the Northwest region even know the difference in bullets and the difference between the sound of a big gun, a short gun and a den-gun”.



International Humanitarian Law is an internationally recognized instrument adopted by states in the international system to provide for the protection of civilians and civilian objects in times of war has largely not been respected in the ongoing conflict in Cameroon's two English-speaking regions. With the banning of schools and the destruction of school facilities, some of which are now been used by the non-state armed groups as a safe haven for their operation, the right to education is been violated. The non-state armed group have since used education as the means to attain their objectives in the conflict regions and at the end of it all, it is the civilian population which suffers due to the lack of enforcement of adequate civilian protection of by the state and the parties in the conflict.

### **Insecurity and Socio-Economic Impact of the Conflict on the Civilian Population**

The conflict has equally had severe socio-economic repercussions on the civilian population. Nancy Achu (2018) states that Cameroon is enriched with natural and agricultural products like oil and gas, timber, cocoa, banana, cotton, maize and cassava. The Income of farmers, business persons and other economic interest groups has fallen sharply if not lost completely (Forbe et al, 2019). The atmosphere of insecurity and instability that followed the 2016 outbreak of the conflict, greatly affected the socio-economic life of the civilian population in the two conflict-hit regions. The Southwest region of Cameroon, for instance, is a major producer of cocoa and coffee. A majority of the civilian population in this region largely depend on these cash crops for their survival. A number of them are involved in the production of these cash crops which they market to be able to take care of themselves and their families while another hug number of them survive by simply working in these plantations, they get paid for the cheap labour rendered and the income in return enables to them fend for their families. For the civilian population in the remote areas, these plantations serve as their principal means of livelihood. However, with the nature of the conflict in the region and the means of warfare adopted by the parties in the conflict, working in these plantations have become almost impossible as they have become dead traps. There have been unfortunate instances of civilians caught in the violence during situations of open confrontations between the conflicting parties in the bushes. In other instances, the non-state armed groups have killed civilians found working in those plantations in the guise that they are persons who do not support the struggle. The conflict has indeed resulted in high levels of insecurity and working in these plantations have simply become a scary venture for the civilian population.

The socio-economic life of the civilian population has suffered some great repercussions given the mass displacement of the population into displacement camps where they can hardly provide for themselves but depend solely on humanitarian assistance for survival. These internally displaced persons can no longer go about their normal activities. The Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC), the country's second largest employer after the government is in agony (Fotso, 2019). The CDC which is located in the Southwest region of the country has not been operational since 2017 when the conflict escalated. Most of its workers have quit work for security reasons. Most of the workers of the Cameroon Pamol Corporation have also suffered serious socio-economic problems since the start of the conflict as a result of their forced displacement. The Cameroon Employers' Association calculated that over 6,434 jobs have been lost in the formal economy sector (Farouk, 2018). This is due to the increasing insecurity and the lack of adequate civilian protection by the state and the parties on both side of the conflict.

The socio-economic consequences of the Anglophone conflict cut across all levels of the society. There has been the mass displacement of persons and the destruction of civilian means of livelihood. For those who stayed back, they have been unable to go about their daily activities with the non-state armed group ghost town strategy of closing down places. It is already bad enough that there is an atmosphere of insecurity caused by the hostilities between the parties in conflict, the lock down strategy just comes to further destroy the lives of civilians who can barely provide for themselves any longer. The Ghost towns completely sink economic activity in the two regions (Fotso, 2019) and civilians who violate this will have to face the wrath of the non-state armed groups and possibly loose their lives in the process.

The situation in the Northwest region is pretty much the same scenario. The population in this part of the country largely depends on the production of local cash crops for their survival but with the ongoing conflict and the rising insecurity, many have been forced to abandon these activities and run into displacement camps.

A civilian of Northwestern origin recounted that "I have abandoned everything I had worked for and become a beggar where I am now. My different sources of income have collapsed"

Another civilian stated that "the conflict has led to a decrease in most farming activities which brings revenue for inhabitant of the Northwest region".

The third civilian interviewed stated that "I have abandoned all my businesses for the past six years and have not been able to go back to my region".

Civilian objects and properties have been the object of attack in the conflict. There has been no form of civilian consideration by the parties in the ongoing conflict. Most of the internally displaced have lost their jobs, their only mean of survival and the cost of living in their new locations is been difficult to them. Some of them were farmers, plantation workers and business men who now face it difficult to survive because of their forceful migration. A good number of respondents recounted that survival without a steady source of income to support their families has been a serious problem.

### **Non-Compliance to International Humanitarian Law Standards of Civilian Protection by the Parties in Conflict**

The International Committee of the Red Cross (2004) affirms that international humanitarian law (IHL) is a set of rules which seek, for humanitarian reasons, to limit the effects of armed conflict on civilian and non-combatants. It equally advances that IHL protects persons who are not or are no longer participating in the hostilities and restricts the means and methods of warfare. IHL is a universally accepted law, adopted by states in the international system to regulate the activities of belligerents during situations of war. Cameroon is a state that has adopted this law and its standards and has the immediate responsibility to protect its citizens whenever there is a situation of an armed conflict. This law applies in armed conflict of an international nature and that of a non-international nature. The ongoing conflicts in the two English-speaking regions of Cameroon is a non-international conflict. International Humanitarian Law defines a non-international armed conflict as a conflict which takes place between the state and a non-governmental armed group, within the territorial borders of the state (Nils, 2019). International humanitarian law is also known as the law of war or the law of armed conflict (ICRC, 2004). This is because the law sets the standard of how parties in conflict ought to conduct themselves in order to avoid civilian casualties. It prohibits the parties in conflict from conducting any act that may cause suffering to the civilian population. Additional Protocol I, article 51 of the 1949 Geneva Convention asserts that the prohibition of attacks on civilian persons and civilian property includes all acts of violence, whether committed in offence or defense. Looking at the situation on ground with the conflict in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon, it is the civilians who are receiving the hard end of the stick given that in the remote areas especially, they are the objects of attack.

The basis of International Humanitarian Law is to protect the civilian population from the effects of wars and is guided by the principle of distinction which provides that parties in conflict must distinguish at all times between civilians and civilian objects and military objectives and direct their operations against military objectives (ACCORD, 2024). The law equally prohibits parties in conflict from using civilians as human shields (Mutuma & Mutunga, 2022). Another basis by which IHL is guided is that of proportionality which avoids attacks that may cause excessive incidental consequences on the civilian population. The law also calls on parties in conflict to take precautionary measures to avoid incidental damages on civilians in conflict situation and these measures must be taken before, during and after an attack is launched, all in a bit to ensure civilian protection.

Conducting a situational analysis of the extend of civilian protection in the two English-speaking regions of Cameroon, International Humanitarian Law has very little applicability by the parties in conflict who show a lack of compliance to this law. There has been little or no distinction between civilian objects and military objectives given that since the escalation of the conflict in 2017, civilian objects and properties have largely been destroyed by both parties to the conflict. Villages have been burnt down, civilian homes have been destroyed, lives have been lost, means of livelihoods have been destroyed and many have been forced into migration due to the nature of the conflict that has failed to ensure the protection of civilian population. Precaution is not taken by the parties before launching any attack and most often than not, the outcome is a civilian casualty in the regions. The parties in the conflict, both the state military and the non-state armed group fail to avoid engaging in attack that may cause incidental consequences on the civilian population. The non-state armed group engage in guerilla attack, mostly hit and run and they do not take any form of precaution on the civilian population.

A civilian of Southwest origin who fled from his village recounted that the non-state armed group carry out direct attack on the civilian population in his village. He recounted that on October 7th, 2024, the non-state armed group raided villages around his area and tortured hundreds of people, both old and young, male and female, who did not go out to match in commemoration of October 1st, the Independence Day of British Southern Cameroons and after which each individual was levied the sum of 50,000FCFA as fine for not respecting that day. As a result of the torture/beating, many villagers were admitted in the hospital for treatment while those who could not bare the pains lost their lives days later. This act goes contrary to the principles and standards of the law of war (IHL)

International humanitarian law applies only once a conflict has begun, and to all sides of the conflict regardless of who started the fighting (ICRC, 2004). By virtue, its scope, once a conflict begins, the parties are automatically expected to respect this law and ensure civilian protection. It is rather unfortunate to say that this has not been the case with the ongoing conflict in the Northwest and Southwest regions and the outcome has been the dire consequences on the civilian population. The continues fail of the state to ensure the compliance of the parties to this law only further deteriorates the situation of civilians in the regions who are in absolute need to coverage and protection.

## V. CONCLUSION

The conflict in Cameroon's Two English-speaking regions has directly affected the lives of the civilian population of the two regions of the country in diverse ways. The conflict has resulted in insecurity and acute humanitarian problems in the region. There has been countless loss of lives, destruction of properties, mass internal and external displacements of hundreds of thousands, high crime rates in the two regions incited by the non-state armed group, the absence of peace and security, the destruction of education as most schools have been non-operational in the regions, the destruction of economy of the region, and most importantly the non-compliance to International Humanitarian Law which stands as a set of rules to be respected in time of conflict to ensure civilian protection. The effects of the conflict so far are devastating on the population. The conflict is, however, still ongoing, implying that the effects on the civilian population will continue to increase as the state and the parties fail to set up applicable standards to ensure not just the protection of civilians and civilian objects in the two regions.

International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and the Geneva convention of 1949 and its Additional Protocol I represent international laws which have been adopted by the state of Cameroon and have as main objective to protect civilians and civilian objects from the effects of conflict. The standards and principles laid out by these legal instruments define the nature of conflict and wars and how they ought to be fought without causing unnecessary suffering to civilian population. The fundamental principles of International Humanitarian Law include: the principle of distinction, proportionality, precaution and prohibition. These principles serve to regulate and limit the methods of warfare adopted by parties in Conflict to guarantee effective civilian protection.

As a means to limit the effects of the conflict in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon, the parties in conflict are expected to fully respect and apply these principles as this will provide the possibility for the parties to distinguish between civilian object from military objectives and strictly direct their attacks at the target and not on the civilian population. By ensuring the application of international Humanitarian Law, parties in conflict will be able to take precautions before launching attacks to avoid incidental consequences and suffering on the civilian population. Therefore, in order to limit the effects of the ongoing conflict, it is important for the non-state armed group on the one hand to respect IHL principles and standards. The State on the other hand can guarantee civilian protection by ensuring that the state military respects IHL and take the necessary precautions in the field.

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