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CAMEROON:

The Anglophone Conflict and The Women's Call for Peace in The Northwest and Southwest Regions

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Abstract

The ongoing conflict in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon which broke out in 2016 with a peaceful protest, has since degenerated into a bloody armed conflict between the state security forces and the non-states armed groups, imposing dire consequences on the affected population, especially women and children. By the end of 2017, the conflict had transformed into an armed conflict due to the drastic measure the government adopted to manage the situation. At the end of the day, the women and children of the conflict-hit regions are the ones bearing the brunt of the conflict and yet these women are not adequately represented during any form of peace talk. The paper adopts a qualitative approach to analyse the effect of the conflict on women and children with observations and interviews conducted in the Buea neighborhoods to arrive at a conclusion. 2021, the conflict is still actively ongoing, inflicting irreversible consequences on the women and children of the Anglophone regions. As the conflict drags on, the women and children on the other hand suffer the impact and some are forced to flee their homes and communities with no hope of returning.

Key words: conflict, conflict impact, peace, insecurity, instability, displacements, resolution.

I. Introduction: Conflicts often occur as a result of a misunderstanding between two or more parties, misunderstanding which leads to irreconcilable differences between them. Some of such scenarios often result in periods of sustained fighting between the parties involved with the goal of achieving their respective needs/interests. A conflict is said to exist when two or more groups engage in a struggle over values and claims to status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate the rival (Coser, 1967). These periods of sustained fighting usually inflict negative effects on the society in question which remains with it even after the conflict has long been managed.

During conflict situations women often have significantly very different experiences from men (Shepherd, 2015). The conflicts on the African continent affect women, children and men in differential ways and women and children are most often than not the most affected by these conflicts. Women and children are vulnerable, they are the victims of every conflict or war and the effects of these conflicts still continue to leave with them long after the conflict has been managed. The conflict in Cameroon's two English-Speaking regions is about a group of people (Anglophone population) fighting to preserve their identity and keep it intact given their arguments that the French-dominated government of the country has made serious attempts to wipe out that identity and make them adopt the French way of life. In an attempt to fight against their assimilation by the Francophone population of the country, a number of rebel groups have developed in the Anglophone regions who are since 2016 challenging state security forces in a battle. It is rather sad to say that it is the innocent women and children who are caught in the cross fire.

The conflict has had a dire effect on the social and economic life of the population of these regions. The conflict which started in 2016 by a mere teachers' and lawyers' protest for greater autonomy, integration of more Anglophones in government and recognition has since degenerated into a bloody one. The conflict has claimed the lives of over 2000 people (Roxana et al, 2019), properties are being destroyed every now and then, schools and medical facilities have been destroyed, homes have been burnt down, at least 206 (CHRDA, 2019) villages have been burnt to the ground leaving hundreds of thousands homeless and helpless, with over 530,000 (OCHA, 2019) Internally Displaced Persons who are always searching for new means of survival and at least 35,000 (CHRDA, 2019) externally displaced. With the current situation of things, the trend is not about to stop any time soon given the continues atrocities being committed on a daily basis and for the women and children of these areas, fleeing and leaving everything behind seems to be their only means of survival.

Reports on the current situation states that more than a majority of these homeless and helpless persons are women and children who will give up just anything to have their current situation return to normal. The conflict has indeed taken a huge toll on these two regions especially since an effective management of the conflict is not forthcoming. The dire effects have been felt by the women and children in different dimensions of their lives.

II. Methodology: This research is based on the study and analysis of data obtained from primary sources and a review of some secondary sources. The study adopted the descriptive research design to analyse data on the subject matter with the use of observations and structured face-to-face interviews. The use of direct interviews availed the researcher the opportunity to have a one-on-one conversation with some affected women to understand the impact of the conflict on women and children in the Northwest and Southwest regions where the conflict his actively ongoing.

The target population of the study consisted of two groups of women;

- i. Women peace activists in Buea, the headquarter of the Southwest region and,

- ii. Women who have been displaced from the remote areas as a result of the conflict and have currently settled in Buea,

The purposive sampling technique was adopted to select the women who participated in the study. The choice of this technique allowed the researcher to select women who could provide valuable information for the study. A sample size of fifteen (15) women were interviewed to gather the data that has been analysed in this paper and make conclusions. The thematic approach was used with the aid of major themes and sub-themes.

III. Effects Of The Conflict On Women And Children: The data gathered revealed that women and girls are either raped or killed during conflict situations and those who survive the atrocities often have to live with the traumatic and terrible images of rape, war and death for the rest of their lives (Tadzie, 2013). The Cameroon Anglophone conflict which started since 2016 has had a great negative impact on the lives and social well-being of those leaving in the two regions affected by the conflict. Women and children, however, feel much of the impact of the conflict considering their defenseless status and vulnerability. Their means of livelihoods have been shut down as a result of the crisis, many have lost important loved one, many have been forced to move into the bushes while others have been forced out of their villages and cities and acquired the status of 'Persons in Need' or better still 'Internally Displaced Persons' commonly referred to as 'IDPs' who are always and constantly in need of humanitarian assistance to survive. Added to all this is the undeniable fact that women and girls are often humiliated and intimidated by the fighters and perpetrators of these wars and the situation is no different with the on-going Cameroon Anglophone conflict. Trafficking of women for forced prostitution, rape and sexual violence in conflict is a calculated war strategy and not a by-product of conflict or war (Kirthi, 2016) and during conflicts situations, these women suffer from sexually transmitted diseases, stigmatization and sometimes unwanted pregnancies (Tadzie 2013). The Cameroon Anglophone conflict has inflicted irreversible consequences on the society as a whole and the women and children are paying the dear price of this ongoing conflict in many different ways. The proceeding paragraphs analyze some of the negative impact of the Anglophone conflict on women and children.

- i. **Education in the Affected Regions:** this conflict has been considered an attack on education. Since 2016, the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon have hardly experienced any effective education with the aspect of lock downs and the destruction of schools as a result of the fighting. Some of these school establishments have become safe havens for non-state armed groups preventing children from going to school. Since 2016, most children in the two affected regions especially those in remote communities have not been to school. Some of them have been introduced in dangerous life styles, some have become thieves, gangsters, others have joined the armed separatist fighters. The girls on the other hand have either become unwantedly pregnant, idling about or are involved in hocking businesses while their mates in the non-affected regions are attending classes. Most parents in the affected areas keep their children at home for security purposes. These children have been stripped of their basic rights like education, healthcare, shelter, food

and water. OCHA reports that over 4,100 primary schools and 744 secondary schools remain close or non-operational (OCHA, 2019). The educational life in the Anglophone regions have been greatly affected by the crisis and the present picture is one that even if we arrive at a successful management of the conflict today, it will be difficult for most of these children to just go back to school. Education is unfortunately one of the areas affected by the conflict. Around 700,000 children of school going age have been deprived of schooling in their home areas (IPSS, 2020). Over 80 percent of schools have not been operational for the past four years in the two English speaking regions of Cameroon due to the security situation in these regions (UNHCR, 2019).

ii. Rape and sexual violence: the condition of women in the two Anglophone regions in Cameroon affected by the conflict has greatly deteriorated since the escalation of the conflict in 2017. Besides the killings, the burning of houses, burning of villages, destruction of schools, the conflict has recorded a number of acts of violence as well as rape cases perpetrated against vulnerable and defenseless women and girls the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon. We cannot talk about this on-going crisis without mentioning the aspect of rape and sexual violence committed against women and young girls. As the conflict drags on without any hope of an effective management, somewhere in the Northwest and Southwest regions, a woman or a young girl is being assaulted by either the non-state armed men or state military men. There has been a number of reported rape cases in the Cameroon Anglophone conflict, with many more going unreported (Amindeh, 2018). A report by the International Rescue Committee in January 2019 came out with some key findings on more than 85 percent of respondents being interviewed who said women and Girls experience rape, sexual assault, psychological abuse, physical violence and early marriage in the Southwest region of Cameroon (International Rescue Committee, 2019). These vulnerable women and children in the affected regions, if given the opportunity to express themselves in peace talks will never wish to be in the conflict situation which they now find themselves. Many researchers have thus argued that rape during war times has been considered as a weapon of war and it is no different with the ongoing crisis in Cameroon's Anglophone regions.

iii. Forced marriage: there has been a number of cases of forced marriages with the ongoing conflict in the Cameroon English speaking regions whereby non-state armed groups have forcefully taken some women into marriage in a bid to display their influence and powers in the conflict affected communities. These girls have no option; they are not given the chance to decide on whether or not they want to be married. This often deprives them of their right to education and their right to reach their full potentials in life. By the time the country finally gets that long awaited resolution of the conflict, the trauma and psychological pain inflicted on these girls will not just go away because the conflict has ended, the harsh memories and flashes will continue to live with them. Then, we will be talking about the long-term effects of the conflict on the victim population.

iv. Sexual and reproductive health problems: women in conflict situation often lack a direct access to medical care, they are always faced with food shortages, lack of water and shelter (Medecins Sans Frontier, 2018). This has regrettably been the case with the ongoing

conflict in the English speaking regions of Cameroon, whereby access to healthcare and provision has been very complicated and challenging. The complicated access to healthcare services faced especially for women and girls is as a result of the fact that medical facilities have been destroyed in most of the affected rural communities since the service providers fear being killed in the crossfire is putting women and girls at the risk for maternal and child death (Etali, 2018). Conflict leads to the lack of medical care for women and girls whose needs not only include treatment for injuries sustained in the conflict and diseases but also an attention to sexual and reproductive health. Sexual activity increases for many girls in armed conflicts, owing to early pregnancy and an increase in STIs in particular HIV/AIDS and a lack of attention especially for pregnant girls contributes to complications in pregnancy and child birth (International Rescue Committee, 2019). This is unfortunately the case with the conflict in the Northwest and Southwest regions of the country whereby those women and girls living in the bushes as a result of the crisis have been unable to get proper medical attention and this has resulted in cases of complications in pregnancies and childbirth. Women and girls in conflict-hit areas in Cameroon are struggling to get access to medicine and menstrual hygiene products and while some have resulted to using the age-old methods like plants, rags and locally-made pads, others rely on the few pads donated by aid organizations (Amindeh, 2018).

- v. **Forced prostitution:** conflicts often create very difficult conditions and in a bit to survive some women and young girls have gone out of their way just to make ends meet. With the crisis in Cameroon, some young girls have resorted to engaging themselves in sex work in order to survive. A young lady who fled the conflict affected areas to a safer place tells her story of how she became a stripper at a night club just in order to make ends meet. Women and girls in the conflict affected areas of the northwest and southwest regions of Cameroon have been the victims of multiple cases of sexual exploitation. Some women in these regions are forced to offer sex in exchange for protection or sustenance (Amindeh, 2018).
- vi. **Displacement Records:** the ongoing conflict in Cameroon's two English-speaking regions has registered a number of 1,850 person killed since September 2017, most schools have not been operational for the past two years, over 206 villages have been burnt (CHRDA, 2019), an estimated 500,000 persons displaced internally and an estimated 40,000 others have sought refuge in neighboring Nigeria (IPSS, 2020). The figures of the Human Rights Watch on the situation in Cameroon stands at more than 437,500 displaced civilians in the Anglophone Northwest and Southwest regions and about 32,600 as refugees in Nigeria (HRW, 2018). The displaced, most of whom are women and children ,face a grave humanitarian situation (UNHCR, 2019). The UNHCR reports that of the total number of IDPs in Cameroon, 60% are women, 43% are children and the refugees in Nigeria, 53% are women and 51% are children UNHCR, 2019). The Cameroon Anglophone conflict has had a dire effect on women and children who make up more than half of internally displaced persons and refugees. This conflict for instance has resulted in large numbers of internally displaced persons as well as refugees in neighboring Nigeria, most of which are women, young girls and children. In most communities in the Southwest, gender relations

have changed. With their men and able boys at the battle front, these women have been left with no other option than to assume the responsibilities of been the head of their homes and be able to provide and take care of their children and communities.

Women and children in conflict situations often feel the greatest impact of the conflict. They are that group which is directly affected by the conflict while the men are at the battlefield. Conflicts have forced women to become household heads and breadwinners, taking over responsibilities for various activities traditionally carried out by men (Bouta & Frerks, 2002). In the case of Cameroon with the conflict in the two English-speaking regions, the women are left to take care of their homes and communities, roles which were originally performed by the men. Some of these women end up not seeing their husbands again and are left to stand in as the heads of their homes. Some women recounted that they have been forced to leave their original place of settlement with their entire families as a result of the conflict with barely nothing or no hope to return. Many of them have become internally displaced persons who can no longer take care of themselves given that they have left their livelihood activities behind. It is precisely these dire effects of conflicts on women and girls that demonstrates the need for women's involvement in peacebuilding (Shepherd, 2015).

Even though conflict affects everyone in the society, the women, girls and children feel the greatest impact of the short and long term effects of the insecurity and the life threatening challenges that conflict brings. With all the devastating effects of the Cameroon Anglophone conflict on women and the many different roles these women have been forced to adopt given the conflict situation in the two Anglophone regions, still women have been underrepresented during the peace process. The women of the Northwest and Southwest regions have long been advocating for a National dialogue to end the fighting which has brought the women and children of the two regions nothing but pain and hardship. On September 30th, 2019, President Paul Biya called for a Major national dialogue to discuss the way forward on the Anglophone conflict. Eight different commissions were created to dialogue and come up with a way forward to managing the conflict in the Anglophone regions. It is however important to note that the Anglophone women who have been bearing the brunt of this conflict from its very inception were highly underrepresented. Thus indicating that even though they suffer most with the ongoing conflict, their voices have been grossly missing in the peace process.

IV. The Anglophone Women's Call For Peace In The Region:

The United Nations saw the untapped potentials of women when it came up the 'Women, Peace and Security agenda' on the need to include women in peacebuilding processes. Almost twenty years after the United Nations Resolution 1325 was passed, women are still being sidelined when it comes to conflict management and peacebuilding. For us to arrive at any meaningful management of the Cameroon Anglophone conflict, women must be considered to participate at all levels of the peace process because the fully understand the impact of the conflict and are better placed to represent the needs, interests and opinions of the entire population during a peace talk. Some of these women in the

Anglophone regions have been influential in maintaining peace at the grassroots level and could be instrumental in the peace process if given the opportunity. If peace makers set out to address the effects of conflicts on women, these women must literally have a seat at the peace table and a hand in the drafting, interpretation, and application of the rule created during transition into peace (Shepherd, 2015). With the situation of the Cameroon Anglophone conflict, for there to be any meaningful management of the conflict and a sustainable peace arrived at, the women should be present and allowed to take active part at every stage of the peace process to tell their stories, narrate their experiences and state their expectations.

With this conflict, the population has witnessed the creation of the Northwest and Southwest Women's Task Force (SNWOT) as well as the creation of the Cameroon Women's Peace Movement (CAWOPEM). The creation of these movements saw the need for the voices of the women in conflict situation in the two affected regions to be heard and the meaningful role the women can play in fighting the conflict and positively influencing the peace process. Their activities have been centered mostly around sensitizing the public and at the same time advocating for dialogue, peace, security and stability in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon. Several times have the women called on the government of Cameroon to make peace and call for a more inclusive dialogue to end the bloodshed that is going on in the two English-speaking regions. They have called on public sympathy both national and international with their public demonstrations for peace. On October 29th, 2020, the Anglophone women were on the streets and the market place in Baffoussam (in the West Region) calling for an end to the Anglophone conflict and peace. All they are asking for is for their voices to be heard. A study conducted by the United States Institute of Peace (2017) indicated that of the 182 peace agreements signed between 1989 and 2011 in the world found out that when women are included in peace processes, there is a 35 percent increase in the probability that a peace agreement will last at least 15 years or more (Lindborg, 2017).

A number of African countries including Liberia, Nigeria, Uganda, Cote d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Rwanda, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau, Kenya and Senegal have adopted the National Action Plan for the implementation of resolution 1325 (National Action Plan for the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and Related Resolutions, 2016-2018). Cameroon has equally adopted the national action plan to implement UNSCR 1325 and with the Anglophone conflict which has inflicted irreversible consequences on women and children, the government's effort in the inclusion of more women in the peace process has not been very evident. Women in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon must not only be seen as the victims of the conflict. Rather; they should be seen as active consolidators of peace and let their voices be heard. Their activism and campaigns could be instrumental in any form of peace building to end the Anglophone conflict.

V. Conclusion And Recommendations:

Some of these women have progressively gone from being victims in the Cameroon Anglophone conflict to survivors of the conflict and have now become peace activists as they fully understand the impact of the conflict and today, they are calling for nothing short of peace in the region. This is because they have seen, have felt it and understand what a continuation of the conflict means on the vulnerable Anglophone population.

- i. The women of the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon have a different experience of the on-going conflict from the men and as such they should be including at all levels of the management of conflict and the peace process. This will give them the chance to be able to present their different experiences and stories of the conflict and their expectations and proposals with regards to the entire peace process. It will be easier for a woman who has been a victim of an abuse to open up to a fellow woman than with a man. An effective management of the Cameroon Anglophone conflict cannot be accomplished without an effective understanding of the consequences of the conflict on women and children. Thus as a recommendation, the Northwest and Southwest women of Cameroon should be given the opportunity to participate in decision making at all levels, with appropriate measures taken by the government to ensure their security and empowerment, and be able to presents their views during the peace process.
- ii. World statistics show that women make up at least half, if not more than half of every country, they make up more than half of the population of every community and they play a central and vital role in community life. They are the caretakers of their homes and communities during conflict situations. They assume different roles during conflict in a bid of taking care of their families and communities. Thus it is only natural they are present and adequately represented to share their unique experiences during the peace process. SNWOT and CAWOPEM have gone out of their way to mobilize and bring together the women of the Northwest and Southwest regions in lamentation campaigns as well as organize training workshops for women on mediation, conflict resolution and peacebuilding. They have equally carried out social media campaigns and called on the government of Cameroon and the international community to seek a peaceful end of the on-going conflict. This in fact has been a bold move towards peace despite the security challenges involved. They should be empowered and encouraged to carry out more campaigns on the respect of human rights, women's rights during conflict and gender equality education on the general public.
- iii. The United Nations Resolution 1325, adopted on October 31st, 2000, affirms the important role women play in the prevention, management of conflicts and the peacebuilding process. The resolution calls on all actors in decision making and the process of peacebuilding to increase the participation of women and mainstream gender in peacebuilding initiatives. This was the first legal document by the security council that called on the parties to a conflict to prevent violence against women and girls and stop the violation on women's rights and support women's participation in peacebuilding processes. Mainstreaming gender in the Cameroon Anglophone

conflict peace process will acknowledge the role of women as peace makers and peace builders as well as ensuring that women's voices are heard.

- iv. The government of Cameroon should consider adopting an affirmation action plan which goes a long way to protect the socio-economic rights of women in the country. More women should be appointed into decision making positions to advocate for women's voices and take part in peace talks between the government and the non-state armed groups. Gender experts and women mediators should be invited and included in the peace process given that they can better understand the special needs and aspirations of the women in the conflict hit areas.

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