



# Civilian Populations in Armed Conflicts: An International Humanitarian Law and Conflict Studies Analysis of the Anglophone Crisis, Manyu Division, South West Cameroon

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**Abstract:** This research critically examines the patterns and dynamics of gross human rights violations perpetrated against civilian populations within the context of the ongoing Anglophone Crisis in the Manyu Division, South West Region Cameroon. Framed within International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and Human Security Theory, and applying the Civilian Targeting in Armed Conflict perspective, the research scrutinizes how both state and non-state armed actors deliberately target, coerce, and exploit civilians in ways that violate the protections guaranteed under the Geneva Conventions. The study situates these abuses within the broader context of asymmetric warfare, where violations are often strategically motivated to achieve political, military, or economic objectives. Using a qualitative, analytical methodology, data was drawn from semi-direct interviews conducted from the months of march to may 2025 with affected civilians in Manyu Division and supplemented with secondary sources including published works, reports, and archival materials. These findings reveal, that civilian targeting is shaped by a combination of structural and strategic drivers. Structurally, state fragility and weak rule of law, civilian perceived neutrality, civil disobedience and the role of informants contribute to heightened risks. Strategically, operational efficiency, propaganda and narrative control, economic cohesion through the sale of basic commodities, and punitive retaliation against expression of opinions further sustain the cycle of violence. In practices, armed actors employ economic and manipulative socio-operational tactics such as ransom demands, the use of vigilante groups, exploitation of personal relationships (dating and courtship) as well as direct physical violence and psychological warfare through intimidation and deterrence. This act has resulted in mass displacement, destruction of properties, loss of livelihood and severe humanitarian security and socio-economic consequences. By focusing on a relatively under researched conflicts in central Africa, the study contributes to existing scholarships in two significant ways: it broadens the empirical base of civilian targeting literature by providing evidence from Manyu Division, and it refines theoretical models by showing how socio-political factors such as vigilante involvement, informants dynamics and personal relationships interacts with broader military strategies to intensify civilian harms. This study concludes that the ongoing violations constitute serious breaches of IHL and calls upon the international community to act decisively, through diplomacy, enforcement of legal norms and cohesive measures to end hostilities and strengthen civilian protection mechanisms in the region.

**Keywords:** Civilian Protection, International Humanitarian Law, Armed Conflict, Manyu Division and Human Rights Violations.

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## Introduction

International humanitarian law distinguishes between international and non-international armed conflicts: International armed conflicts, hostilities between two or more states, irrespective of formal declarations of war and non-international armed conflicts; where government forces engage armed insurgents or where armed groups fight among themselves. In both contexts, IHL and customary international law uphold the principle of distinction requiring the protection of civilians and objects from the effects of hostilities. The targeting or exploitation of civilians is prohibited under the Geneva Conventions (1984) and its Additional Protocols (1977), yet such violations remain widespread in contemporary conflicts.

In recent years, the use and victimization of civilian population in armed conflicts across Africa have become alarmingly frequent, with Cameroon's ongoing crisis in its English-speaking regions particularly in Manyu Division providing a stark example. Located in South West Region, Manyu Division covers approximately 9,565 KM and is home to an estimated 181,039 inhabitants. Administratively, it comprises four sub divisions: Mamfe Central, Eyumodjock, Upper Banyang, and Akwaya. The principal ethnic groups, the Banyang and Ejagham, share cultural, linguistic, and traditional practices.

The current crisis in Cameroon's Anglophone regions began in 2016 as peaceful protests by lawyers and teachers against the appointment of Francophone magistrates to common law courts and Francophone teachers to English medium schools. By early 2017, after the arrest and imprisonment of leaders of the lawyers (UN OCHA, 2004) and teacher consortium, the situation escalated as elements in the diaspora took an active role in coordinating civil disobedience campaigns, including weekly "ghost town" shutdowns. Security forces responded with force, and by late 2017, the dispute had transformed into a protracted non international armed conflict. The Manyu Division was among the first areas to experience armed clashes between the government regular army and separatist forces commonly referred to as "Amba Boys" or "Ambazonian fighters"<sup>1</sup>.

Nine years later, the division remains deeply insecure, with recurrent clashes between state and non-state actors. While a minority of civilians has aligned themselves with separatist forces, the overwhelming majority of unarmed and vulnerable community, including women, children, the elderly, the sick, refugees, and internally displaced persons have sought to remain neutral. In asymmetric armed conflicts where one side is far more powerful (for example the state forces) and the other less so (for example insurgents or militias) it's quite common for segments of the population to adopt a neutral stance. The reasons for this neutrality on the part of civilian population in the ongoing armed conflict has been justified by inhabitants in several communities during our interview. While some based their neutrality on factors such as survival and self-preservation, holding grounds on fear of reprisal, stating that supporting either side can make them targets of other and the uncertainty of outcome, when it's unclear who will "win", they avoid committing too early to avoid punishment later. To

some, their neutrality is based on desire for stability and ethical beliefs over ideology. Many people do focus on daily needs, prioritizing access to food, water, markets and safety over political or military alignment, while others rely on pacifism or religious neutrality, rejecting armed participation entirely.

Paradoxically, this neutrality has not spared them from harm; it has made them frequent targets of coercion, exploitation, and violence by both sides. This has resulted in over one thousand documented civilian deaths, numerous cases of grievous bodily harm, kidnappings, sexual violence, maiming, destruction of homes, farmlands and mass displacement, both internally and across the border into neighboring Nigeria<sup>2</sup>.

This study seeks to examine why and how civilians in the Manyu Division have become targets for both state forces and separatist fighters, despite the protections guaranteed under IHL. The overarching aim is to contribute to the understanding of civilian exploitation in international armed conflicts and to advance recommendations for strengthening civilian protection. By situating the Anglophone Crisis within the broader conflict studies and humanitarian law frameworks, the research aspires to strengthen national and international efforts to mitigate civilian suffering and uphold the rule of law in-conflict zones.

## Theoretical background and related literature

This study aligns with the Theory of Change<sup>3</sup> by clearly defining the problem of gross human rights violations in the Anglophone Crisis, unpacking the causal pathways behind civilian targeting, and providing empirical evidence that can inform targeted interventions such as legal reforms, accountability mechanisms, and protection systems. It adds to the theory by highlighting how localized socio-political dynamics such as vigilante activities and personal vendettas interact with broader strategic military objectives, thereby refining traditional theory of Change (ToC) models that often overlook micro-level conflict drivers. Furthermore, by integrating International Humanitarian Law as both a normative framework and an operational benchmark, the study strengthens the legal accountability dimension of change models and bridges theory with context-specific evidence from a largely under-researched African conflict, enhancing the applicability and precision of the Theory of Change in asymmetric warfare settings.

The conflict in Manyu division that has been witnessing gross human rights abuses from warring parties can be ascribed to the conduct of armed actors. Thus, implementing the change theory in this research work will stand as a stepping stone for a positive behavioral change, and as such, limiting the violation of the rights of civilian populations.

There already exist interesting literatures on the targeting or usage of civilian populations in armed conflicts. In the first place, Joshi & Quinn (2017) investigated the determinants of which groups of civilians were targeted by rebels and government forces in the civil war in Nepal and showed what victims of one-sided violence shaped key demographic characteristics with combatants killed in

<sup>1</sup>The name given to the armed groups fighting to restore the independence of the former territory of British Southern Cameroon (today known as the North West and South West regions of Cameroon)

<sup>2</sup>The number of civilians deaths recorded by a cross section of villages in the four(4) sub-divisions of Manyu division in the course of our field studies through interview with local inhabitants.

<sup>3</sup> Diakonia International Humanitarian Law Centre (DIHLC) ,our theory of change: <https://www.diakonia.se/ihl/about-us/theory-of-change/>.

battle. Thus, a strong continuity in the characteristics of inhabitants across space could drive the spatial spread of civilian targeting. For example, if a group is targeted because of some of its traits, and individuals with the similar traits inhabit neighboring areas, then the perpetrator may wish to target those individuals as well.

Social dynamics and their impact on intergroup violence in Rwanda were extensively studied in the works of McDoom, who showed that, mobilization of social groups to target other civilians follows a two-stage process. First of all, the emotions of distrust and fear lead to polarization of attitudes and perceptions of the target group as others or legitimate targets. Secondly, the presence of material and structural opportunities turns these emotions into violence (McDoom, 2012). In the third category, the organizational and resource environments have also been shown to matter for the use of lethal force by armed actors.

Kalyvas (2006) focused much in his work on explaining how actors choose between indiscriminate violence and selective violence. The use of selective violence is a relatively resource intensive activity because, it accurately identifies true enemies and requires some degree of territorial control within which to conduct expensive intelligence activities. In contrast, indiscriminate violence can be a resource cheap way to kill some enemies but at the cost of pushing people into the ranks of rival actors as often happened under Nazi occupation. In the works of Kalyvas & Kocher (2009), it was evidenced that, during the Vietnam War, rebels did turn to use selective violence more in areas where they had good, but not complete control.

There exist a bond between the control based theory of Kalyvas Stathis also mentioned by Raleigh & Choi (2017) in their work "conflict dynamics and feedback: explaining change in violence against civilians within conflicts", and the economic theory of Anderton (2014) & Ferrero (2013) which implies that under certain conditions, civilian targeting will be a decreasing function of the resources available to an actor. This is reflected in the works of Wood (2010), who showed that, weak actors kill more civilians than their more capable counterparts as they are unable to deliver sufficient benefits to civilian, the population that could ensure their loyalty. In his work, Wood (2014) reconciles the control based and economic theories by showing that severe battlefield losses and resulting resource demands lead to an increase in attacks on civilians. According to Wood Reed, this relationship is conditioned on the degree of territory control and sources of actors and financing.

Some of the above studies are similar to our work in that, they all seeks to find out why are civilians populations targeted in arms conflicts, with a view of protecting the civilian Populations. It all takes into consideration the respect of human rights in all its forms. That is to protect the vital core of all human lives in ways that enhance human freedoms and human fulfillment. Thus, respecting the concept of Human security proposed by the UN Commission on Human Security (UN CHS, 2003), which in essence means protecting fundamental freedoms, freedoms that are the essence of life? It means protecting people from critical (severe) and pervasive (widespread) threats and situations, using processes that build on people's strengths and aspirations and creating political, social, environmental, economic, military and cultural systems that together give people the building blocks of survival, livelihood and dignity. Despite the similitude of our work with existing literature as seen above, there exist some differences. While some of the

above literature takes into consideration elements such as the characteristics of victims, social dynamics and behavior of perpetrators and organizational structures of perpetrator groups and their access to resources as reasons for civilians targeting in other countries such as Nepal and Rwanda, we seek to bring out the why and the how armed groups do use civilians in the ongoing armed conflict in Manyu division, a specific localized division of the south west region of Cameroon.

This study employs a qualitative case study design positioned at the intersection of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and conflict studies. The case of the Anglophone Crisis in Manyu Division was selected because it offers a representative example of how civilians are inconsequentially targeted in asymmetric armed conflicts. The methodology integrates doctrinal legal analysis, which examines the relevant IHL norms, with empirical conflict research, which draws on the lived experiences of affected populations. Primary data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with civilians directly affected by the crisis, including displaced persons, community leaders, and members of local associations. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure that participants are witnesses of human rights violations and civilian targeting. Secondary data was obtained from a variety of sources, including academic literature, NGO and humanitarian agency reports, archival records, and relevant legal instruments such as the Geneva Conventions, their Additional Protocols, and regional human rights instruments. These materials provided complementary perspectives and normative benchmarks against which field findings were assessed.

The analysis combined thematic coding of interview narratives with doctrinal legal reasoning. Thematic analysis enabled the identification of recurring patterns such as retaliatory violence, ransom demands, and suppression of dissent while doctrinal analysis evaluated the legality of such practices under IHL principles of civilian immunity, proportionality, and distinction. Triangulation across primary testimonies, documentary evidence, and legal texts enhanced both validity and reliability, reducing the risk of bias or overreliance on any single source. Given the sensitivity of conflict research, the study adhered to strict ethical protocols. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained verbally in cases where written consent posed risks. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured, and no identifying details were recorded in order to protect participants from potential reprisals.

The methodology acknowledges constraints arising from restricted access to insecure areas, the emotional weight of personal testimonies, and the partiality inherent in advocacy reports. Nevertheless, the combined use of multiple sources and methods strengthens the reliability of the findings. By integrating doctrinal and empirical perspectives, this approach ensures that the study is both theoretically grounded in IHL and enriched by the lived realities of civilians in Manyu Division.

## **I- Structural and Strategic Drivers of Civilian Targeting by State and Non-State Armed Actors**

To say why the civilian populations in Manyu division become a target to armed actors demands an investigation to pull out structural and strategic factors such as inadequate criminal investigation, Civilians' neutrality, Civil disobedience, the Transfer of aggression, Selling of basic commodities to parties in armed conflicts and Expression of opinion, acting as informant.

## A- Structural drivers

Structural drivers of civilian targeting are the deep-rooted, long-term conditions in society that creates an environment where armed actors see civilians as legitimate or useful targets. These drivers explain the underlying systematic causes that make such targeting possible or attractive. These are rooted in societal, systemic or institutional conditions that shape behaviors.

### a- State fragility and faulty investigation

The lack of information and or inadequate investigations has witnessed the usage of hundreds of civilian populations in Manyu division. **This reflects institutional weakness** or systemic failure. Investigation can be defined quite simply as a systematic fact finding and reporting process. It is derived from the Latin word **vestigere**, to “track or trace,” and encompasses a patient, step-by-step inquiry (Bennett & Hess, 2004) In an armed conflict environment, there are always individuals who willingly or deliberately get involve into actions or activities that may incriminate them. These activities may be seen in the provision of assistance such as information on enemy hide outs and others. Given that these groups of individuals are being considered as enemies by the conflicting parties, they are therefore subjects of attack.

The weak judicial system within this community has led to lack of information and investigation by both military and armed groups. To track down these groups of individuals always leads to a disaster on the part of the innocent civilian populations. This is the case in Bachuo-Ntai village in Mamfe sub division. In this village, the search of one Mr. Ako Tanyui who was believed by the military to have been supporting ambazonian armed groups, without proper investigation, landed the military to a different civilian baring the same name. This lack of investigation led to the death of this man and his two sons, with one other civilian as his neighbor. In the same village, on their part, armed groups also chopped down the hand of one Mr. Nkongho Daniel as he was nick-named as “Mananger”, the same nick-name that was given to another man who is believed to have been giving armed groups secrets to the military.

### b- The criminalization of civilian neutrality

Shaped by broader social and security conditions, often a response to risk or lack of protection, the protection of civilians in armed conflict in International Humanitarian Law is seen as a legal right for civilian neutrality in armed conflicts<sup>4</sup>. On the contrary, civilians’ neutrality in the ongoing conflict in Manyu division has been interpreted by conflicting parties as a threat. Both the military and armed groups believed that, to win the war they must do so with the support of the civilian population. In a case where the civilian population decides to be neutral to the conflict, their neutrality is being translated to mean a threat. The translation of this civilian neutrality has seen the death of many civilians in Manyu division perpetrated by both the military and armed groups. This is the case with Egbekor village in Mamfe sub-division whereby, the military short death two civilians for refusing to give the names of family members of armed groups. This neutrality has also been seen in the recent attack of the civilian population in the Mamfe motor park by separatist armed groups that led to the death

of three civilians with several others wounded and destruction of civilian’s property.

### c- Civil disobedience as a double edge sword

Arises from the structural grievances or societal pressures, the noncompliance or disrespect of orders has been witnessed in the implementation of ghost towns by armed groups, asking sometimes for a total or partial lock down of markets, shops and the travel bans. Civil disobedience is defined by Rawls (1971) as a public, nonviolent, thorough yet political act perverse to law commonly aiming at bringing about a change in the law or government policies. It is further urged by Rawls that, initially civil disobedience is a political act that does not only focus on the majority who hold political powers, but it is also directed and rationalized by the political principle of justice. Further still, civil disobedience according to Rawls is a public act not only concerned about principles, but it is done in the public not concealed. To add to that, civil disobedience is nonviolent since it expresses disobedience to law but within the limits of the law even though it is at outer edge thereof. Interestingly, the law is broken, but loyalty to it is still withheld by the public who are aware and willing to accept its legal consequences.

Bedau (1991) on his part defines civil disobedience as an act which is illegal, committed openly, non-violently, and conscientiously, within the framework of the rule of law and with the intention of frustrating or protesting against some laws, policies, or decisions of the government or some of its officers. Quigley & Bahmueller (1991), on their part, defines civil disobedience as a deliberate, public, conscientious, and nonviolent act that breaks a law in which the person accepts responsibility and punishment. It is an act of nonviolent protest undertaken to alleviate some injustice, usually with an appeal to some higher principle or law.

Based on this definition, the act considered as civil disobedience is first, the citizen must disobey the law, and most often the law that is being broken is considered unjust. Second, the citizen would have to deliberately and publicly disobey the law. The citizen must be acting to serve the common good, not the personal interest. Third, the citizen must act conscientiously, in that he or she has an honest belief that his or her actions are intended to correct a grave injustice. Finally, the act must be nonviolent and the citizen must be willing to accept the consequences of his or her action.

Smith (2004) stated that civil disobedience is a public, illegal and political protest carried out against state or policies. Acts of civil disobedience might be justified within a constitutional democracy. Justification here is understood as a moral or political justification where civil disobedient citizens claim that they are morally or politically entitled to disobey the law. Such acts of civil disobedience are against the wishes of Government armed forces and the separatist fighters. With this, a civilian who decides to disobey such orders given by armed groups is considered as a ‘black leg’ (enemy). On the other hand, civilians who out of fear of the unknown, from armed groups and decides to lock down or stay home in such days are considered as well by the military as taking side with armed groups. Interview in the course of this research in a community in Akwaya sub-division outlined the fact that, some civilians including Mr. OKUMO Nikolas of Assaka Village were killed by separatist fighters for disrespecting the ghost town order<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Civilians in areas of armed conflict and occupied territories are protected by the 159 article of the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with civilian locals in OSAKA Village in Akwaya sub-division in Manyu division.

On the other hand, civilians who respected the ghost town orders were considered by the military as taking side with the fighters. As such, a brutal search of these individuals by the military without success led to the burning of civilians houses in Mavas village in Akwaya, that lead to the death of over 6 civilians<sup>6</sup>.

#### **d- Civilian Risk in Asymmetric Intelligence Warfare**

In Manyu division, Hundreds of civilians have visited their early graves with many others sustaining grievous harms, with fingers and legs chopped out and in some cases with the payment of a find or ransom with some cases of imprisonment for the fact of acting as informants to the conflict, either on the side of the military or on the side of the armed groups. , This is in a situation whereby, a civilian decides to take side in the conflict by giving information to one party to the conflict against the other party. These groups of people are called Unlawful Combatants ( Bilkova 2009) Under the Fourth Geneva Convention, civilian spies do not lose their civilian status if they are detained during espionage. However, if military security requires so, they shall be regarded as having forfeited their rights of communication. They are to be treated humanely and in case of trial, be granted all fair and regular trials prescribed by the Convention<sup>7</sup>.

The term unlawful combatant is not an independent legal concept. In the framework of International Humanitarian Law, it has served as a relatively useful descriptive expression; characterizing one of the factual phenomena frequently encountered in the course of armed conflicts namely, the lack of a clear distinction between combatants and civilians. This term was formally used by the US Supreme Court (1942) in its decision in the *Ex Parte Quirin*. The case concerned a group of eight German agents who, disguised in civilian clothes, penetrated the territory of the US in a submarine, with the purpose of committing acts of espionage and sabotage there. Arrested before committing any hostile act, the agents were brought to a military commission specifically constructed for this purpose by the then President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and were sentenced to the death penalty.

In its decision on the appeal, relating mainly due to the issue of jurisdiction, the US Supreme Court stated that: 'by universal agreement and practice, the law of war draws a distinction between the armed forces and the peaceful populations of belligerent nations and also between those who are lawful and unlawful combatants.' The Court added that while the former 'are subject to capture and detention as prisoners of war by opposing military forces,' the latter, including spies and saboteurs, are 'likewise subject to by opposing military forces,' the latter including spies and saboteurs are likewise subject to capture and detention, but in addition they are subject to trial and punishment by military tribunals for acts which render their belligerency unlawful (U S Supreme Court, 1942) However in the case of the conflict in Manyu division, justice is not rendered in most cases as it is to be done. Civilians, who find themselves in this state of affair, when arrested, are sometimes shot dead, or forced to become handicaps. This is the case with one Mr. Etta (jam-body), who was arrested by armed groups for acting as a spy and giving information to the military. His body was later found lifeless along the road leading MTN network antenna in Bachuo-Ntai village.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with civilian inhabitants of Mavas Village, Akwaya sub-division.

<sup>7</sup> See Article 5 of the Fourth Geneva Convention.

## **B- Strategic drivers**

Strategic drivers of civilian targeting entail the overarching motivations or purposes that push armed groups and state actors to inconsequentially attack or manipulate civilian populations. these drivers go beyond immediate tactics (the how) and instead explains the why at the strategic level.

### **a - From battlefield losses to punitive civilian retaliation**

Attacking soft targets when direct confrontation with opposing armed force or group is costly or risky, emanating from intentional targeting or displacement of anger for strategic purposes, majority of civilians in Manyu have been used in the ongoing armed conflict due to the transfer of aggression. Although the scientific definition of aggression has changed slightly over time, the definitions utilized by aggression researchers have congregate to support a single definition. In social psychology, aggression is most commonly defined as a behavior that is intended to harm another person who is motivated to avoid that harm (Bushman & Huesmann (2010) and (Anderson & Bushman (2002)).Transfer of aggression therefore may be defined as a situation whereby, when we are offended by someone, we tend to at most times pour out our annoyance or anger on other people who are totally ignorant and unaware of the situation that might have transpired between us and the person who annoyed us. According to (Bushman & Huesmann, (2010), this type of aggression is called displaced aggression. It occurs when an innocent substitute target becomes the victim of aggression

In Manyu division, transfer of aggression has become the order of the day in the ongoing armed conflict. This is one of the reasons why the civilian populations in Manyu are being used as a shield in the ongoing armed conflicts. In this situation, when both the government forces and separatist armed groups are confronted in a battle, be it 'in' or 'out-side' a nearby community or village, any party who sustains heavy injury and or casualties becomes aggressive. The aggressive party without a possibility of giving same treatment to the opponent automatically unleashes its aggression to any nearby civilian's population or community. In the course of our research and interview granted to inhabitants of some communities such as akwaya town, Agbor-kem, Obang, Afab, Bessong-abang, Nchang, Nchemba, Etoko mile 18, Etoko mile 19, and Etoko mile 22, many testify that, several attacks by both military and Ambazonian fighters on the civilian population are as a result of transfer of aggression. This has played a major role in the attack of civilians in the ongoing armed conflict in Manyu division.

### **b – From ideology to violence**

The targeting of civilians to reinforce ideological claims or delegitimize the opposing side is a push factor for civilian targeting in the ongoing conflict in Manyu division. Propaganda and narrative control play a central role in shaping how armed actors justify violence against civilians. By constructing persuasive narratives, these actors seek to reinforce their ideological claims while simultaneously delegitimising the opposing side. Propaganda provides a selective framing of events, portraying targeted civilians as enemies, collaborators, or obstacles to the cause. Through speeches, pamphlets, media campaigns, or social networks, armed actors disseminate messages that dehumanise certain populations and rationalise their targeting as both necessary and legitimate. This manipulation of perception transforms acts of violence into

symbols of resistance or justice within the group's ideology. At the same time, narrative control undermines the credibility of state authorities or rival factions, painting them as oppressors, traitors, or foreign agents, thereby eroding public trust in alternative leadership. In this way, propaganda does not only justify civilian targeting but also strengthens internal cohesion, secures popular support, and sustains the group's long-term strategic relevance. Ultimately, propaganda and narrative control are not peripheral tools but deliberate drivers of violence, allowing armed actors to frame civilian targeting as an act of ideological necessity rather than unlawful aggression.

### **c- The weaponization of Basic commodities**

Parties to any armed conflict will always be in need of basic commodities to sustain their members in periods of war. According to *Grace Allen*, during the Civil War, Union and Confederate Soldiers didn't have a lot of options. They had to survive with the food they were given, called rations. Food was not always easy to get because of the war. Most soldiers were just happy to get food, even if it was the same thing, again and again. These basic commodities may include food items such as bread, water, meat, plantains, drinks and others such as clothes, shoes, etc. These basic commodities can sometimes be gotten by the warring parties from local communities which they find themselves, either by means of looting or by purchased.

The quest of these items in either way by both the military and armed groups have in several cases gotten the civilian population in Manyu involve in horrible situations. In this situation, when civilians in a community sells any of the above mentioned items to members of the state armed force, these civilians are automatically considered a threat by members of armed groups. Likewise, when civilians sell these same items to members of armed groups, they the civilians are considered as enemies by the state armed forces. In Bachuo- Ntai village, a lady who owns an open dressing shop was arrested by the military for haven sold dresses to the separatist fighters. She testified during our interview that; she was brutally given kicks on her legs before finally granted bail.

### **d- Freedom of expression and civilian targeting in a security dilemma**

Civilians' actions perceived as supporting one side, influencing strategic targeting Civilian populations in Manyu division are in a security dilemma today with the Government forces on one hand and the separatist armed groups on the other, due to the expression of opinion as to what concerns the ongoing armed conflict. Freedom of expression is an essential part of democracy, and free speech goes hand in hand with a free media (Svensson et al 2016). Thomas Jefferson, the principal author of the American Declaration of Independence wrote "Where the press is free and every man able to read, all is safe" (Jefferson 1816/1900). Society changes, but certain democratic principles remain true. Among them are freedoms to think, to speak, to listen and to write, to express one self and to communicate with others (UN universal Declaration of Human rights Article 19).

On his part, Forsskål (1759/2009) in his work "Thoughts on Civil Liberty" said 'It is also an important right in a free society to be freely allowed to contribute to society's well-being. However, if that is to occur, it must be possible for society's state of affairs to become known to everyone, and it must be possible for everyone to speak his mind freely about it. Where this is lacking, liberty is not worth its name'. The expression of these rights by the civilian

population in Manyu Division has never gone without punishment, either from the side of the military or from the separatist fighter. In such a case, any civilian's expression of opinion with a view of positive construction that does not favor one party to the conflict, that party turns to the civilian population with anger. During our interview, locals in several villages said, "We can no longer talk; even to give our opinion as to a solution to the crisis has become a taboo. To watch television has become a problem to us. They will come in, break TV sets, break satellite dish, beat and even kill some, just for the simple reason that we wish to express our rights". Haven examined why civilians are being used in the ongoing armed conflict, it is also a call for concern to understand how they are being involved in armed conflict by the belligerents.

## **II- Operational Techniques of Civilian Targeting**

There exist several operational techniques or tactics through which both armed forces and separatist fighters do involve civilian populations in ongoing armed conflict. Using Economic and social manipulative tactics on one hand, it examines techniques such as the demand for ransom, the use of vigilante groups and courtship. On the other hand, it examines direct physical violence and psychological warfare, exploring the use of force and threats or intimidation.

### **A- Economic and manipulative social-operational tactics**

Civilians are exploited financially or use as leverage to extract resources and drawn into personal or social relationships with armed actors, which have been exploited for coercion, control or justification of targeting

#### **a- Demand for ransom**

The demand for ransom by both the Amba fighters and the military have in several cases witness the usage of civilian population in the ongoing armed conflict in Manyu division. Separatist fighters and the military in several cases have engaged innocent civilians in the war by arresting and detaining for the payment of huge sums of money. This is done expressly by some armed groups, who will illegally arrest a civilian and keep in their custody, and turn to the family members of the victim to pay a huge amount of money sometimes worth millions. during this findings, a cross section of civilians in villages such as Bachuo-ntai, Kembong, Afab, Bachuo- akagbe were interviewed with many testifying that, during the cocoa seasons, there is always massive arrest of civilians by both Amba fighters and military to collect huge sums of money. According to the locals in the above-mentioned villages, "the Amba fighters will arrest use and take use to the bush, they will ask us to pay huge sums of money before liberating us. The military will arrest us and take us to prison; they will ask us to pay two hundred thousand each before we can be freed". For those who are rich, they will sometimes ask them to pay a million and above.

#### **b - The used of vigilante groups**

Though there is no legal foundation for the formation of vigilante groups, the illegal and forceful use of civilians to organise vigilante groups in some localities by the military has also seen the involvement and usage of civilians in armed conflicts in Manyu division. The term vigilante entered English in the 19th century, borrowed from the Spanish word of the same spelling which meant "watchman, guard" in that language. The Spanish word can be traced back to the Latin *vigilare*, meaning "to keep awake." The earliest use of the word in English was to refer to

a member of a *vigilance committee*, a committee organized to suppress and punish crime summarily, as when the processes of law appear inadequate. The word may often be found in an attributive role, as in the phrases “vigilante justice,” or “vigilante group.” In this slightly broadened sense, it carries the suggestion of the enforcement of laws without regard to due process or the general rule of law (Marriam Webster). The use of civilians in creating such groups in some communities in Manyu division has left the civilians with nothing more than attacks from the separatist fighters.

This is the case with Mbinjong village in the Upper-bayang Sub-division. According to one member of the vigilante group, the military instructed them to create a vigilante group against the Amba fighters. The creation of this group has led to the killing of one Mr. Tataw by the Amba fighters (separatist fighters). Mr Tataw happened to be the leader of the vigilante group in Mbinjong village. More to this, the killing of the former regent chief of Eshobi Village in Mamfe sub-division and eleven (11) others is also associated to the creation of the vigilante groups by the military using civilians against the Ambazonian fighters.

### **c - Courtship and the perceived threat of civilian allegiance**

In warlike situations, dating a member of an armed force or an armed group has become a nightmare. Dating according to Niehuis (2008) can be defined as an appointment or a series of appointments with a person one is socially, romantically, or sexually interested in. Although it is often part of the mate selection and courtship process, dating is also a popular leisure activity in its own right among many adolescents and adults. The meaning, purpose, and activities of dating are influenced by culture, religion, social norms and conventions, parents and friends, and change with time. The popular saying “love has no boundaries” in its normal sense does not exempt parties to an armed conflict.

However, dating has never been easy in conflict situations when it comes to civilians getting into dating relationships with members of armed groups or armed forces. This is the case with the armed conflict situation in Manyu division. Here, when a civilian gets into any form of dating relationship with a member of an armed force or with a member of the Amba fighters, the civilian is considered as a threat by the opposite party to the conflict, thus reducing the civilian populations to greater vulnerability and subject to attack. Several cases have witnessed such dating situations in the ongoing armed conflict in Manyu division.

A practical example here is a scenario that took place in Bachuo-Ntai village in Mamfe sub-division whereby, two ladies got into a dating relationship with members of the state armed force. When the state of these dating relations got to the knowledge of the separatist fighters, these two ladies were arrested, tortured and compelled to pay a charge of one hundred thousand (100,000) francs each before they were released. On their part, the military has also in several cases arrested ladies having or suspected of having such a dating relationship with separatists’ fighters, with several cases of torture and in most cases, they are being released on financial negotiations and or bail.

## **B – Direct physical violence and psychological warfare**

Parties to the ongoing armed conflict have resorted to the use of direct physical violence and psychological methods for civilian targeting. With direct physical violence that entails the use of force, these includes assaults, beating, killings or other forms of physical intimidation aimed at controlling civilians. The psychological method involve the use of threat that’s takes into account intimidation or verbal threats intended to install fear, influence behavior or compel compliance without immediate physical action.

### **a- Direct physical violence**

The use of force and threats has been seen as a method used by both the military and separatist fighters to engage civilians in armed conflict in Manyu division. This in other words is termed ‘Coercion’, defined by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN-OCHA) as the use of force, or the threat of force, to persuade an opponent to adopt a certain pattern of behavior that is against their wishes. The international community prohibits the use of force by conflicting parties on the civilian’s populations. According to the fourth Geneva Convention, “Civilians cannot be forced to do military-related work for an occupying force”<sup>8</sup>. This rule has witnessed a great violation in the ongoing armed conflicts in Manyu division, as both parties to the conflict have in several cases, forced civilians to take side with them by performing one task or the other.

Our interview with locals from a cross section of villages shows that, this has been the case with several villages in Manyu such as Besong-Abang, Bachuo-Ntai, Bachuo- Akagbe, Osing, and Agbor-kem, where the military launched massive arrest of civilians and compelling them to show arm groups hide out. These same villages have seen the use of force by the separatist fighters, asking civilians for financial contributions to buy their weapons’. Thus, a refusal of these orders has witnessed the killing, harassments and the forceful displacement of civilian victims of such circumstances within these communities.

### **b – Psychological warfare and deterrence**

Threats and intimidation constitute a prominent operational tactic employed by armed actors to exert control over civilian populations. Targeting civilians to instill fear undermine morals and reduce resistance. Unlike direct physical violence, this method relies on the psychological impact of fear to achieve compliance, silence dissent, or extract resources. Armed groups and forces may issue anonymous letters, phone calls, public ultimatums, or symbolic acts such as burning homes and destroying crops to signal the consequences of non-cooperation. Such tactics deliberately create an environment of insecurity where civilians are coerced into obedience without necessarily being physically harmed. This is the case with the Bachuo ntai community in Manyu division where by the state security forces deliberately hung the state flag in an unusual position to maintain their supremacy. With the use of public ultimatum, they threatened the burn down civilian houses should the flag be brought down. The civilian population has also witness threats from the separatist fighters through phone calls and public ultimatum, on any civilian who does not respect their “ghost town” orders. The threat of violence often proves as effective as actual violence, as it induces

<sup>8</sup> Art. 40 of the fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 relative to the protection of civilians.

self-censorship, displacement, or forced allegiance to the group. Furthermore, intimidation is used to weaken trust in state protection mechanisms, making civilians more vulnerable to warlike party's narratives and control. Ultimately, by employing threats and intimidation, armed actors minimize their operational costs while maximizing psychological domination, ensuring sustained influence over targeted populations.

## Conclusion

The ongoing armed conflict in Cameroon's Anglophone Regions has rendered the Manyu Division a focal point of civilian victimization. This study reveals that the targeting and coercion of non-combatants are driven by a combination of structural and strategic factors. State fragility, weak criminal investigations, the criminalization of civilian neutrality, civil disobedience, and blurred civilian combatant role rooted in intelligence dependence constitute key structural vulnerabilities. Strategically, punitive retaliation after battle filed losses, propaganda and narrative control and the weaponization of basic commodities, reinforce cycles of violence and deepen mistrust between communities and warring parties.

Operational practices including ransom demands, the use of vigilante groups, the manipulation of personal relations, and both direct physical violence and psychological warfare further illustrates how civilians are deliberately embedded in the logic of conflicts. The cumulative consequences from displacement and destruction of property to sexual violence, amputations, enforced disappearances, and loss of life, constitute serious breaches of international humanitarian law and international human right law.

The persistence of such violations underscores the inadequacies of existing protective mechanisms and raises fundamental questions about the enforceability of international legal norms in fragile state context. Addressing these crises requires urgent, coordinated engagement by the international community in partnership with the Cameroonian state and regional actors. Ending the exploitation of civilians in Manyu is both a humanitarian necessity and a critical step towards restoring legal accountability and building sustainable peace across Cameroon and central Africa.

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