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An end to linguistic loyalties

Why Nigeria is aligning with Cameroon against secessionists



Territory claimed by the Federal Republic of Ambazonia

In January, Nigerian state security operatives swooped on a meeting of Cameroonian separatists in an Abuja hotel, arresting and deporting 47 of them, including their leader Sisiku Ayuk Tabe. It was a clear demonstration of the country's stand on the crisis unfolding in Cameroon, its eastern neighbour.

The English-speaking section of Cameroon has long complained of marginalisation by the dominant French-speaking region which controls the central government. Over the past year, the administration has

cracked down on disgruntled Anglophone teachers, lawyers and trade unionists when they have staged protests.

In October 2017, activists in the region declared independence from Cameroon, naming the small English-speaking territory in the South 'Ambazonia'. In response, Cameroonian President Paul Biya sent in troops, unleashing more violence that resulted in many casualties. The English-speaking separatists hit back, killing some soldiers. This effectively marked the beginning of the armed struggle for independent that has driven innocent civilians across the border into Nigeria.

Refugees not welcome

Given the level of violence in Cameroon, Nigeria's decision to deport the activists was roundly condemned by human rights groups, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and several countries. They say the deportations violate international law, which prohibits governments from returning asylum seekers against their will.

Historically, Nigerian has always welcomed pro-independence groups and accommodated liberation movements.

The primary concern of Nigeria's critics was that the separatists might be maltreated by the Cameroonian authorities. Their fears were confirmed when Cameroon's government spokesman Tchiroma Bakary described them as a 'group of 47 terrorists' who would soon be made to 'answer for their crimes' before Cameroonian courts.

Nigeria's justification for the deportation was that the secessionists were operating illegal training camps for its fighters within its territory, insisting that it could not allow its land to be used as a launching pad for attacks on a friendly neighbour.

This, according to the UNHCR, is worrying thousands of Cameroonian refugees residing in the neighbouring country, who fear they too could be deported if their Nigerian hosts feel uncomfortable with their presence. This can only worsen the plight of the refugees who have lost almost all their personal belongings and homes in Cameroon.

Friends no more?

What prompted Nigeria to openly support the Cameroonian government against Anglophone Cameroonians whose kinsmen are Nigerian nationals? Historically, Nigerian has always welcomed pro-

independence groups and accommodated liberation movements. Professing Africa as the centrepiece of its foreign policy, Nigeria has traditionally provided financial, material and logistical assistance that helped these groups to achieve their objective. As recently as last year, it joined with other West African states to force former President Yahya Jammeh of the Gambia out of power after he refused to step down following his defeat in the country's last election.

Nigeria and other friendly countries need to bring the various factions in the Cameroonian conflict to the negotiating table before the situation gets out of control.

Firstly, it's in Nigeria's interest to back President Biya, because Cameroon stood solidly by it in the war against Boko Haram Islamist terrorists in its north-eastern region. Cameroon and Nigeria are also members of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MJTF) whose troops have joined a regional effort to destroy the Jihadists.

Clearly, the involvement of the MJTF has helped weaken the terrorists' ability to destabilise the affected countries. Nigeria can hardly then turn around and accommodate Cameroonian dissidents. By aligning with Yaoundé, Nigeria is expressing thanks for Cameroon's support in the fight against Boko Haram – you scratch my back, I scratch yours.

Also, if Nigeria does not take decisive action, the Cameroonian conflict could worsen the current refugee situation in Nigeria, which is already struggling to cope with the millions of people internally displaced by the nine-year-long Boko Haram insurgency, as well as those forced to find new homes following fighting between herdsmen and farmers.

More than 25,000 Cameroonian refugees have crossed into Nigeria with dozens more arriving every week, according to Caritas Nigeria. Emergency service officials in the country say they are barely able to provide basic food and medical supplies to existing refugees. More arrivals would push them to the brink.

In addition, a breakdown of law and order along the Nigeria-Cameroon border could result in a massive inflow of small arms into the area. That bodes ill for Nigeria, which is already awash with illegal weapons used by armed robbers, insurgents, kidnappers and other criminals.

Nigeria and other friendly countries need to bring the various factions in the Cameroonian conflict to the negotiating table before the situation gets out of control. After all, secessionist tendencies are being well managed in other parts of the world without recourse to violence – take Scotland, Flanders or Quebec.



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