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# The Cameroon Anglophone Crisis: Examining Escalation and Seeking Solutions

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### Introduction

This document provides an overview of a meeting, held at Chatham House on 2 November 2017, to discuss recent developments in the crisis in anglophone Cameroon. The speaker was Dr Nkongho Felix Agbor Balla, founder and chairman of the Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa (CHRDA).

The crisis had escalated significantly in early October, after militant secessionists declared independence for ‘Ambazonia’ – an English-speaking region in the south of the country. A subsequent crackdown by government forces left dozens dead and brought the region to the brink of an armed uprising. Dr Balla explored the political and economic grievances of Cameroon’s anglophone population, the government’s response to the declaration of independence, and the importance of civil society and the diaspora in bringing about a resolution to the crisis. He defended his own position in favour of the creation of a federation, rather than secession from Cameroon.

The meeting was held on the record. The following summary is intended to serve as an aide-memoire for those who took part, and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

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### Dr Nkongho Felix Agbor Balla

The roots of the recent escalation in the conflict between the francophone and the anglophone populations of Cameroon can be found in the colonial history of the country. Initially a German colony, Cameroon was divided between the British and the French from 1916 onwards. After British and French troops forced the Germans to leave the country, Cameroon was divided into French (80 per cent) and British (20 per cent) territories through the London Declaration of 1919. In 1922 the League of Nations conferred mandates on Britain and France for their administrative zones, and in 1946 these mandates were renewed as UN trusteeships.

While the French administrative zone was granted independence and became the Republic of Cameroon in 1960, the zones administered by the British were given the choice, at a UN-sponsored referendum in 1961, of joining either Cameroon or Nigeria. Southern Cameroons voted in favour of joining the Republic of Cameroon, and Northern Cameroons voted to join Nigeria. Cameroon, now incorporating Southern Cameroon, initially became a federal republic. Following a national referendum in 1972, however, Cameroon once again became a centralized, unitary state, with all power resting in the hands of the president. This left the anglophone population excluded from much of the political process.

Feeling themselves marginalized, representatives of the anglophone minority came together in the first All Anglophone Conference (AAC), held in Buea in 1993. The conference declaration called for the restoration of the federal state. A second AAC took place in Bamenda the following year, and issued a declaration calling for independence for Southern Cameroons should the federal state not be restored within a reasonable time. In line with the Bamenda Declaration, the AAC was renamed Southern Cameroons People’s Conference (SCPC), and later Southern Cameroons People’s Organisation (SCAPO), with the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC) as its executive governing body.

As the demands made in the declarations of 1993 and 1994 were not met, representatives of the SCNC and SCAPO filed a petition before the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights in Banjul in 2003, submitting evidence of violations of human rights – including torture, arbitrary arrest and detention, as

well as violations of the collective rights of the peoples of Southern Cameroons. In response to the petition, the Commission issued recommendations to the government of the Republic of Cameroon including the abolition of discriminatory practices against the anglophone population, the termination of the transfer of accused persons from anglophone provinces for trial in francophone provinces, and the initiation of a constructive dialogue with the SCNC and SCAPO. These recommendations were not implemented by the Cameroonian government, and the practices set out in the petition continued.

In October 2016 the presidents of anglophone lawyers associations met in Bamenda to organize a strike to protest against what they referred to as the ‘francophonization’ of the judicial system and a systematic attempt by the central government to erode English common law in the anglophone parts of Cameroon. The lawyers saw the country’s bilingualism, biculturalism and bijuralism, which is enshrined in the constitution, as being threatened by the French language and procedures that were being imposed on the anglophone parts of the country. Teachers in anglophone Cameroon joined the strike action in November, and protests turned violent in Bamenda in December.

In response to the violence, Dr Balla stated that he had co-founded the Cameroon Anglophone Civil Society Consortium (CACSC) in order to create a coordinated mouthpiece for the different groups and their grievances. From the outset, CACSC took the path of demanding representation for anglophone Cameroon within a federation. After initial negotiations with the government, CACSC and the SCNC were both banned and their activities were proscribed in January 2017. Leaders of the two organizations, including Dr Balla, were arrested and charged by a military court with ‘fostering hostility against the government, secession, civil war, propagation of false information, collective resistance and incitement to take up arms’ – charges that could have incurred a possible death sentence. After eight months of imprisonment and hearings before military tribunals, all charges were dismissed for 54 of the imprisoned civil society leaders. Meanwhile, access to the internet was blocked in anglophone regions of Cameroon as a measure of what the speaker termed collective punishment.

The state’s extreme response to the demands of the anglophone population served to further radicalize the protesters, whose demands shifted from representation in a federal state to the creation of an independent ‘Ambazonia’. The situation escalated on 1 October 2017 when militant secessionists declared independence for ‘Ambazonia’. Dozens of people were killed, and hundreds arrested, in a subsequent crackdown by government forces. A taskforce set up by an association of anglophone lawyers succeeded in getting almost 300 of those arrested freed from custody, but at least 700 people remain in detention and are being tried in front of French-language military tribunals in Yaoundé.

In this tense situation, confidence-building from both sides as well as national dialogue are needed. CACSC is maintaining its demand for representation within a federal state, but it is only willing to enter into negotiations with the government under certain conditions. Before negotiations can begin, all those who were arrested unlawfully must be released. In addition, CACSC demands a complete amnesty for members of the anglophone diaspora who had been blacklisted by the Cameroonian authorities, as well as the acceptance of dual nationality by the government. Once these conditions are met, CACSC suggests a low-level dialogue, potentially in cooperation with the Kofi Annan Foundation, followed by dialogue in the presence of EU or UN observers to find a lasting solution for the ongoing conflict.

## Summary of question and answer session

*What do you think are the reasons for the government's strong response not only to the campaign for independence, but also to the demands for changes in the legal and educational system?*

*To what extent has the internet shutdown in parts of the country influenced the course of the events?*

*Considering the fragmented nature of the anglophone community and its competing demands in Cameroon, what would be the best course of action for the various splinter groups?*

The strong response of the president and the central government can be explained by the nature of the current political system. It is in the nature of strong men in centralized systems of government to respond to such opposition with brute force. The president and members of the government have financial and political interests in preserving the status quo, and thereby their power, using all means available to them. The upcoming 2018 elections present an additional reason for the government to repress opposition and preserve the system as it stands.

The internet shutdowns have been particularly problematic in Douala, where a large part of Cameroon's digital economy is based. Many companies have had to leave the region because of the disconnection, leaving local staff unemployed.

Before attempting to hold another AAC, there should be a dialogue between all leaders of the various factions of the anglophone movement, with the aim of streamlining their various demands. In order to succeed in negotiations with the central government, the leaders of the myriad factions first have to agree a common cause that unites them, rather than focusing on diverging views.

*How do you respond to people on your side of the struggle calling you a traitor for not following their calls for independence from Cameroon?*

*What are the next steps for the central government to facilitate a peaceful negotiation process?*

*Do you think the central government can be trusted to provide a level playing field in the negotiations between the francophone and the anglophone parts of the country?*

In the current situation, things are emotionally charged and it can be hard to discern verifiable facts from alternative narratives put forth by smear campaigns. CACSC has consistently stood for the creation of a federation, and will continue to work toward dialogue and negotiation. At the end of the day, history will show that CACSC is working for the interests of the anglophone minority in Cameroon, not the interests of the central government.

Regarding the path towards finding a solution, the government will have to demilitarize the zones of anglophone Cameroon it currently occupies and release the people who are unlawfully imprisoned. If those demands are met, the representatives of the anglophone population of Cameroon will be ready to negotiate with them.

Although the government has overstepped many legal and political lines, a solution for the current crisis can only be found by working with the government. Rather than perpetuating internal fights, federalist and secessionist parts of the anglophone movement should keep their eye on the ball and aim to find a solution within the Cameroonian state.

*How would you ensure that all sides abide by an agreement reached between the central Cameroonian government and representatives of the anglophone parts of the country?*

*In light of the current uncertainty, would you advise that the elections scheduled for 2018 should take place as planned?*

*What is the potential role of francophones in Cameroon in helping the cause of the anglophone movement, especially in the current climate of hostility between the two sides?*

*You have elaborated on the demands you have for the central government in the negotiation process. What are the concessions your side is willing to make in order to facilitate a compromise with the government?*

*What is the potential role for neighbouring states, particularly Nigeria, in the negotiation process?*

While the struggle for the rights of the anglophone population was initially focused mainly on the anglophones, the vital role of moderate parts of the francophone population of Cameroon is now being fully appreciated. In order for the movement to succeed, it needs the support of moderate francophones.

In the run-up to the 2018 elections, it is essential for anglophones to channel the dynamics of the anglophone movement into mobilization. Rather than boycott the elections completely, representatives of the anglophone side have to make it on to the ballot papers, and members of the anglophone community need to register to vote.

The role of regional partners in the struggle for federal representation of the anglophones is a complicated issue. Nigeria has its own problems, and cannot be relied on to mediate in Cameroon's internal struggle. Furthermore, the international community will only give attention to the situation if it escalates. Therefore, dialogue first needs to take place on a national level before international or regional observers can become part of the next steps of the process.