

# Human Rights Watch

## Children's Rights

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Download the full report in English

Download the Summary, Recommendations, & Methodology in French

Appendix I: Safe Schools Declaration

Appendix II: Letter to Prime Minister Joseph Dion Ngute

Appendix III: Response from Dr. Jonathan Levy

Appendix IV: HRW Letters to Separatist Leaders

Appendix V: Office of the Deputy Defense Chief letter to Samuel Sako

Appendix VI: Code of Conduct, Ambazonia Defense Council

Appendix VII: Akoson Raymond letter to HRW

Appendix VIII, Statement on Education by Dr. L. Cho Ayaba

Appendix IX: Letter from the Leadership of Ambazonia in Prison

Video

Download the full report in English

Download the Summary, Recommendations, & Methodology in French

Appendix I: Safe Schools Declaration

Appendix II: Letter to Prime Minister Joseph Dion Ngute

Appendix III: Response from Dr. Jonathan Levy

Appendix IV: HRW Letters to Separatist Leaders

Appendix V: Office of the Deputy Defense Chief letter to Samuel Sako

Appendix VI: Code of Conduct, Ambazonia Defense Council

Appendix VII: Akoson Raymond letter to HRW

Appendix VIII, Statement on Education by Dr. L. Cho Ayaba

Appendix IX: Letter from the Leadership of Ambazonia in Prison

Armed Separatist Attacks on Students, Teachers, and Schools in Cameroons Anglophone Regions

(Nairobi, December 16, 2021) Systematic and widespread attacks by armed separatist groups on students, teachers, and schools in [Cameroons](#) Anglophone regions since 2017 have had a devastating impact on childrens right to education, Human Rights Watch said in a report released today.

The 131-page [report](#), They Are Destroying Our Future: Armed Separatist Attacks on Students, Teachers, and Schools in Cameroons Anglophone Regions, documents scores of education-related attacks by armed separatist groups in the English-speaking North-West and South-West regions between March 2017 and November 2021. The groups have killed, beaten, abducted, threatened, and terrorized students and education professionals; harassed and intimidated families into keeping their children out of school; and burned, destroyed, damaged, and looted school buildings.

Schoolchildren, their parents and teachers hold a protest after suspected armed separatists opened fire at a school, killing at least seven children, in Kumba, South-West region, Cameroon October 25, 2020. 2020 REUTERS/Josiane Kouagheu

(Nairobi, December 16, 2021) Systematic and widespread attacks by armed separatist groups on students, teachers, and schools in [Cameroons](#) Anglophone regions since 2017 have had a devastating impact on childrens right to education, Human Rights Watch said in a report released today.

The 131-page [report](#), They Are Destroying Our Future: Armed Separatist Attacks on Students, Teachers, and Schools in Cameroons Anglophone Regions, documents scores of education-related attacks by armed separatist groups in the English-speaking North-West and South-West regions between March 2017 and November 2021. The groups have killed, beaten, abducted, threatened, and terrorized students and education professionals; harassed and intimidated families into keeping their children out of school; and burned, destroyed, damaged, and looted school buildings.

Sara was a 17-year-old high school student when separatist fighters occupied her school, causing her to flee her hometown in Cameroons North-West region out of fear. She decided to move to the capital, Yaoundé, to finish her education. On the way, she was stopped by armed separatists, who searched for items she had relating to education, tore up her schoolbooks and notebooks, and warned her that worse would befall her if she was found with such materials again. In Yaoundé, she could not afford the school fees, and had to seek work, which she found at a pineapple company. After working for two years, she abandoned her dream of finishing school.

In the South-West region, Clara the head teacher at a government school, refused to abide by the separatist-ordered education boycott. When separatist fighters broke into her home in March 2019 to extort and punish her, she paid 30,000 CFA (US\$56) and more in blood: they inflicted wounds all over her body, cutting her right hand so severely it had to be medically amputated, and losing the use of her left hand.

The stories of Sara and Clara are unfortunately all too common experiences for students and teachers in Cameroons North-West and South-West regions who, since 2017, have become victims of attacks by armed separatists on education.

These attacks have become a hallmark of the crisis in the countrys Anglophone regions, which has resulted from the post-independence political, economic, cultural, and social marginalization felt by the Anglophone minority, who live in Cameroons North-West and South-West regions. Although Cameroon is a bilingual and bijural country, many Anglophones believe the government is trying to sideline and assimilate their education and legal systems into the dominant Francophone system.

Tensions escalated in October and November 2016 and again in September and October 2017 when Cameroonian security forces used excessive force against peaceful protests led by teachers and lawyers. Different Anglophone armed separatist groups have since emerged and grown, and education soon became a primary battleground.

Separatist fighters began to order and enforce school boycotts, including by attacking scores of schools across the Anglophone regions. They have also used school buildings, such as Saras school, as bases for storing weapons and ammunition as well as holding and torturing hostages. Separatist fighters have also attacked, intimidated, or threatened thousands of students, education professionals, and parents in their attempts to keep children out of school. These attacks, the resulting fear, and the deteriorating security situation have caused school closures across the Anglophone regions, denying students access to education.

While armed separatists bear full responsibility for their targeted attacks on education, the response by the Cameroonian government and security forces has been insufficient and is hampered by the fact that they have conducted many abusive counterinsurgency operations in the English-speaking regions which sowed deep distrust among the civilian population victimized in those operations. Sometimes the abusive operations have also had a direct impact on education. For example, the report documents security forces burning at least one school which was being used by armed separatists as a base. Therefore, while enhanced security should offer protection to students and teachers, in practice many students and teachers also fear abuses from the security forces.

Based on telephone interviews conducted between November 2020 and November 2021 with 155 people, including 29 current and former students as well as 47 teachers and education professionals, this report documents attacks on students, teachers, and schools, as well as the use of schools by armed separatist groups, in the North-West and South-West regions between March 2017 and November 2021. It also examines the impact of those attacks, which have denied approximately 700,000 students an education. After describing the Cameroonian governments responses, it highlights gaps and, more importantly, potential solutions that the Cameroonian authorities, in collaboration with their international partners, should implement to stop and address attacks on education.

Separatist fighters have killed, kidnapped, assaulted, threatened, or extorted hundreds of students and teachers while at school, on the way to or from school, or at home. Human Rights Watch does not claim to have documented all or even the majority of such attacks, but believes what it has documented indicates the scope of the problem, and disproves any claims that these are isolated problems. Human Rights Watch documented the killings of eleven students and five teachers: seven students were killed during an attack on their school in Kumba, South-West region, three students and one teacher were killed during an attack on their school in Ekondo-Titi, South-West region, while the eleventh student and the other teachers were killed while they were at home or on their way to or from school. Human Rights Watch also documented the death of two schoolgirls caused respectively by a gendarme and a police officer shooting at vehicles which failed to stop at checkpoints. Human Rights Watch documented the kidnapping of at least 268 students and education professionals by armed separatists between January 2017 and August 2021. In two incidents alone, one in 2018 and another in 2019, fighters kidnapped 78 and 170 students, respectively, from their schools in the North-West region. Most of the victims (255) were students, while nine were teachers and four were principals. Victims said that the separatist fighters targeted them because they were going to school.

At least 70 schools have been attacked in the Anglophone regions since 2017, according to reports from United Nations agencies, the World Bank, Cameroonian and international civil society organizations, and media outlets. Human Rights Watch documented in detail 15 attacks on schools by separatist fighters between January 2017 and November 2021. Armed separatists visited schools, ordering their closure, threatening and terrorizing students and teachers, and destroyed school infrastructure and property, including with fire.

Human Rights Watch documented the occupation, between early 2017 and March 2019, of at least five schools by separatist fighters in the North-West region. They used schools as bases, and also held hostages and stored weapons and ammunitions in them. Some moved from school to school, like the ones who took over Saras school. In one case, evidence suggests Cameroonian security forces burned a school building that had been used by separatist groups.

The Cameroonian authorities have taken steps to respond to attacks on education, including by endorsing the Safe Schools Declaration an intergovernmental political agreement to protect students, teachers, and schools during armed conflicts in September 2018. In line with its commitments to ensure that students are able to continue their education, the government has conducted more robust back-to-school campaigns in the Anglophone regions. It has also stationed security forces in or outside schools, mainly in major urban centers, to increase safety. However, there is almost no such security presence in rural areas or on roads leading to and from schools. More importantly, students and teachers have had mixed reactions to the deployment of security forces in or outside schools, as some believe their presence increases the risk of being targeted by armed separatists. There is also an urgent need for the government to address the lack of resources and overcrowding in schools whose populations have doubled, or even tripled, due to the need to accommodate internally displaced students.

By signing up to the Safe Schools Declaration, the Cameroonian government agreed to protect education, including by investigating and prosecuting perpetrators of attacks on students, teachers, and schools. Clara, unlike the vast majority of victims of attacks on education, has experienced a degree of justice, as at least one of her alleged assailants was arrested and is currently facing trial. This is not the norm: in addition to the arrest made in her case, Human Rights Watch is aware of only two sets of arrests for attacks on schools since 2017 one set involves the arrest of 10 persons after a 2019 attack on a university, the other involves the arrest of 12 persons following the October 24, 2020 attack on the school in Kumba. The fate of the 10 suspects arrested in 2019 is unknown, and the trial of those arrested in connection with the Kumba school massacre, held before a military tribunal, failed to meet basic fair trial standards. This suggests that the separatists have enjoyed almost absolute impunity for their attacks on education.

School closures because of the boycott orders or attacks on schools by separatist fighters, fear of being targeted for studying, and economic challenges have all caused students to drop out of school, robbing young people in the Anglophone regions of their right to education. This has only been exacerbated by further school closures related to the Covid-19 pandemic. The trauma of experiencing or witnessing an attack, which is exacerbated by the lack of psychosocial support services, has affected students ability to learn and caused many teachers to change professions. This will have longer term effects on their economic and social mobility as individuals and on the development of the regions and Cameroon as a whole. This report describes not only the emotional harms, such as those experienced by Sara and Clara, but also the resilience of the students and teachers who struggled to continue their studies and work, respectively, which sometimes required choosing to relocate.

Nearly 600,000 people have been displaced by the crisis unfolding in the two English-speaking regions a figure which likely includes thousands of teachers and students and were forced to flee and begin a new life elsewhere. This report also documents the experiences of displaced students and teachers, highlighting the specific hardships faced by older teachers.

International human rights law obligates the Cameroonian government to respect, protect, and fulfill the right to education, and in signing up to the Safe Schools Declaration the government committed to take steps to prevent attacks on schools and mitigate their impacts. Unfortunately, the attacks by armed separatists have continued, largely unabated, causing students, parents, and teachers to suffer enormously. Absent urgent action to address the lack of access to education caused by separatist attacks, many students will lose out on an education, and may face a bleak future with reduced socioeconomic opportunities.

The government of Cameroon which bears the primary responsibility for guaranteeing the right to education should promptly provide access to alternative forms of education, including community education, distance learning, radio learning, and temporary learning spaces to students who are out of school because of the crisis, including rural and displaced students. Those responsible for attacks should be arrested and prosecuted, and an accessible reparations program, including physical rehabilitation and psychosocial support services, should be made available to victims and their families. The Cameroonian government should consider establishing two special task forces, one to assess and make recommendations regarding investigations and prosecutions of attacks on schools and the other to support the re-establishment and continuation of access to safe education for all.

Cameroons international partners, such as Canada, France, Italy, Switzerland, the United States, the United Kingdom, the European Commission, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the African Union, should provide financial and technical support to ensure that the special task forces and reparations program are adequately resourced and sustainable.

During times of crisis, ensuring access to education is crucial because safe and protective environments like schools can provide a sense of normalcy essential to childrens development and psychological well-being. All stakeholders in the Anglophone crisis should take immediate action to prevent yet another generation in Cameroon from losing out on an education. Leaders of separatist groups should immediately announce an end to the school boycott and instruct fighters to cease all attacks on students, teachers, and schools.

**Amba boys:** terms used by some Cameroonians to refer to armed separatist fighters in the North-West and South-West regions.

**Ambazonia** (or Republic of Ambazonia): term used by some people from the North-West and South-West regions to refer to a self-declared state announced by pro-separatist groups and constituting the North-West and South-West regions of Cameroon.

**Anglophone regions:** the North-West and South-West regions, Cameroons two minority English-speaking regions among the countrys 10 administrative regions.

**Attacks against education:** Human Rights Watch uses the following definition of attacks against education provided by the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack: Attacks on education are any intentional threat or use of force carried out for political, military, ideological, sectarian, ethnic, religious, or criminal reasons against students, educators, and education institutions.

**CFA:** refers to the Central African CFA franc, Cameroons currency (CFA stands for *Communaut Financire Africaine*, African Financial Community).

**Child:** In accordance with international law, Human Rights Watch defines child as a person below the age of 18 years.

**Education professional:** Teachers, principals, school administrators, members of teachers unions, or local education officials.

**Francophone regions:** Cameroons eight French-speaking administrative regions: the Centre, Littoral, West, North, Far North, Adamawa, East, and South regions.

**Student:** A student may refer to a child (under age 18) or an adult (18 or older).

This report is based on 155 telephone interviews between November 2020 and November 2021, including with 29 current and former students, 47 teachers and other education professionals, and 15 relatives of students. The current and former students included 4 children (2 girls and 2 boys) and 25 young adults (9 women and 16 men). We also interviewed 64 others, including witnesses to human rights abuses, former separatist fighters, healthcare, social and humanitarian workers, lawyers, journalists, civil society representatives, United Nations officials, and diplomats. Interviewees included residents of Cameroons North-West and South-West regions.

Human Rights Watch conducted the interviews with the support of an extensive network of contacts in Cameroon. Interviews were conducted in French, English, Pidgin English, and local dialects, with the support of trusted interpreters who were physically with the interviewees for those interviews conducted in Pidgin English and local dialects.

Human Rights Watch informed all interviewees of the purpose of the interview, its voluntary nature, and how the information would be used, and we obtained oral or written consent for all interviews. We told all interviewees that they could decline to answer questions and end the interview at any time. Interviewees did not receive financial incentives or other benefits for speaking with Human Rights Watch beyond the reimbursement of their travel expenses, where applicable.

Nearly all victims of attacks and witnesses expressed serious concerns and fears of reprisals for speaking with us. Human Rights Watch has thus used pseudonyms and withheld identifying information of most of the victims and witnesses. We have withheld or replaced all childrens names with pseudonyms. Unless otherwise specified, we have noted interviewees ages at the time of the interview.

Human Rights Watch sought to address the limitations of telephone interviews by using secondary sources to corroborate findings. We examined reports by Cameroonian and international human rights and humanitarian organizations, national and international media, and government bodies in addition to photographs, video footage, medical records, and court documents.

Due to ongoing violence, challenges accessing the country and collecting information from remote areas, Human Rights Watch sometimes faced difficulties confirming the exact numbers of victims, circumstances, and alleged perpetrators of specific attacks.

In a July 27, 2021, telephone call with Felix Mbayu, Minister Delegate at the Ministry of External Relations in charge of relations with the Commonwealth, Human Rights Watch shared its preliminary findings for this report. Human Rights Watch also sent a letter, with its findings and a list of questions, to Prime Minister Joseph Dion Ngute and Mbayu on September 21, 2021. The Prime Minister had yet to reply at time of writing. The letter is available in Appendix II.

Human Rights Watch also shared its preliminary findings on September 22 with the leaders of four major separatist groups: the president of the Ambazonia Interim Government (Sisiku), Sisiku Ayuk Tabe; the spokesperson of the Ambazonia Interim Government (Sako), Christopher Anu; the president of the Ambazonia Governing Council, Cho Lucas Ayaba; and the chairman of the African Peoples Liberation Movement, Ebenezer DerekMbongo Akwanga. The letters sent to the leaders of the four major separatist groups are available in Appendix IV.

On September 27, 2021, Anu responded to Human Rights Watch during a Zoom call.

On September 29, 2021, Dr. Jonathan Levy, the legal representative of Akwanga, responded via email to Human Rights Watch and his full response is available in Appendix III.

On September 30, 2021, Akoson Raymond, secretary of the Department of Human Rights & Humanitarian Services of the Ambazonia Governing Council, responded via email to Human Rights Watch. His full response is available in Appendix VII. On October 10, 2021, Akoson also shared with Human Rights Watch via email a code of conduct of the Ambazonia Defense Forces, the armed wing of the Ambazonia Governing Council. The code of conduct is available in Appendix VI.

On December 6, 2021, Human Rights Watch received a letter dated November 29, 2021 signed by the Leadership of the Ambazonia in prison, headed by Sisiku, with a Freedom Protocol attached as an annex in response to Human Rights Watchs request for information. Both the letter and the protocol are available in Appendix IX.

Cameroons Anglophone crisis and separatist struggle are rooted in the countrys colonial history, tensions surrounding its independence, and Anglophones feelings of marginalization and concerns about assimilation into the Francophone system and culture.

The geographical area of modern Cameroon was originally a German colony, Kamerun, divided into French and British mandates after World War I. After gaining independence in 1961, Cameroon was a federation from February 1961 to May 1972, when Cameroonians voted to adopt a unitary government. Following decades of what they saw as marginalization by the Francophone-dominated government, in 1993, an All-Anglophone Conference convened in Buea, the former capital of the British territory, calling for a return to federalism. In response, the government pledged to adopt some reforms to decentralize power. The following year, a second All-Anglophone Conference issued the Bamenda declaration, recommending a two-state federal system or secession. However, the government maintained its support for the unitary system, causing Anglophone groups to begin calling for secession, including through diplomatic campaigns.<sup>[1]</sup>

The current crisis began after the government violently repressed peaceful strikes by Anglophone lawyers and teachers in October and November 2016. They were protesting what they perceived as the central governments attempts to marginalize and assimilate Anglophone courts and schools into the Francophone system. Similar heavy-handed responses by security forces against peaceful protests to celebrate the symbolic independence of Ambazonia, the name given by secessionists to their self-proclaimed independent state comprising the North-West and South-West regions, occurred again between September 22 and October 2, 2017.<sup>[2]</sup>

Moderate voices began to fade, as armed separatists, many of whom are known locally as amba boys or amba, grew in number, profile, and support, both nationally and internationally. They began to attack security forces and government officials as well as order and enforce school boycotts and lockdown strikes (or ghost towns), requiring people to stay at home and not go to work in the North-West and South-West regions to pressure the government into granting greater political recognition to that area.<sup>[3]</sup>

In 2018, thousands of security forces were deployed to the Anglophone regions, where they conducted often abusive large-scale operations to locate and drive out armed separatists.<sup>[4]</sup> Armed separatists took control of some rural and urban periphery areas.<sup>[5]</sup> erecting roadblocks and checkpoints.<sup>[6]</sup> Separatists also continued to enforce school boycotts as well as weekly lockdown strikes.<sup>[7]</sup> Several upticks in the violence occurred from January 2018 to December 2019, including around presidential elections;<sup>[8]</sup> the arrest, detention, and trials of separatist leaders;<sup>[9]</sup> and lockdowns imposed by armed separatists.<sup>[10]</sup>

Around the February 2020 legislative and municipalelections, armed separatist groups kidnapped over 100 people, burned public and private property, and threatened voters in the period before the elections. Security forces did not adequately protect civilians; instead, they committed retaliatory abuses during the same period.<sup>[11]</sup>

In March 2020, the Southern Cameroons Defence Forces (SOCADEF), an armed separatist group, unilaterally called for a ceasefire because of Covid-19.<sup>[12]</sup> Notably, neither the government nor the other armed separatist groups have called for a ceasefire despite the rising toll of the pandemic.<sup>[13]</sup> Instead, after separatist fighters killed a police officer in September 2020, the government launched Operation Bamenda Clean to weed out separatists,<sup>[14]</sup> during which the security forces also abused civilians.<sup>[15]</sup>

In December 2020, separatist fighters marred Cameroons first regional elections<sup>[16]</sup> through boycotts, threats, and violent attacks.<sup>[17]</sup> Attacks by both separatist on civilians,<sup>[18]</sup> government forces and authorities,<sup>[19]</sup> and the UN<sup>[20]</sup> and by the army against civilians continued into 2021.<sup>[21]</sup> September 2021 marked a new escalation of violence with separatist fighters killing at least 15 soldiers and several civilians in two separate attacks in the North-West region using improvised explosive devices and an anti-tank rocket launcher.<sup>[22]</sup>

On October 5, Cameroonian Prime Minister Dion Ngute visited Bamenda, the capital of the North-West region, to follow up on the implementation of recommendations formulated during a national dialogue.<sup>[23]</sup> The same day, his public speech was interrupted by sustained gunfire, allegedly coming from separatist fighters. Ahead of Ngutes visit to Bamenda, the Ambazonian Defence Forces (ADF), one of the main armed separatist groups, had ordered residents to stay at home, saying that anyone participating in meetings with Ngute could be at risk.<sup>[24]</sup>

As a result of the Anglophone crisis, there are 573,900 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the Anglophone regions as well as in the Francophone Littoral, West, and Centre regions.<sup>[25]</sup> In the Anglophone regions, 2.2 million people need humanitarian assistance.<sup>[26]</sup> The provision of basic services, including education and health care, has been disrupted.<sup>[27]</sup> Humanitarian access remains a challenge due to the volatile security situation and the targeting, by armed separatist groups, of humanitarian personnel,<sup>[28]</sup> with the UN recording at least 19 incidents of abductions involving humanitarians staff between April 2020 and August 2021.<sup>[29]</sup> Due to insecurity and separatist roadblocks across the Anglophone regions in August 2021 alone, 40,000 people could not receive humanitarian aid, according to UNOCHA.<sup>[30]</sup>

By 2021, more than 1.2 million school-aged children were in need of humanitarian assistance in the two Anglophone regions, and approximately 700,000 of them needed urgent access to education services.<sup>[31]</sup>

Since late 2016, up to 66,000 people from Cameroon have also fled to Nigeria.<sup>[32]</sup> Thousands more have left the continent for Europe or the United States.<sup>[33]</sup>

At least 4,000 civilians have been killed by armed separatist fighters or government forces in the Anglophone regions since late 2016.<sup>[34]</sup>

The crisis has resulted in a significant contraction of the economies of the North-West and South-West regions, also seriously affecting the whole countrys economy.<sup>[35]</sup> According to the World Bank, given the extent of destruction of productive assets, as well as the adverse effects of the crisis on the local credit market, the impacts may be lasting.<sup>[36]</sup>

In the Anglophone regions, heads of households have been killed,<sup>[37]</sup> business have closed, and people have lost their jobs.<sup>[38]</sup> Displaced families have lost their livelihoods, so struggle to pay for food, housing, and their childrens school fees.<sup>[39]</sup> The violence has impacted thousands of farmers by displacing them,<sup>[40]</sup> thus increasing their risk of hunger and poverty as well as challenges providing for their children. Some parents in the Anglophone regions told Human Rights Watch they had to pull their children out of school because they could not afford the school fees and the associated costs of education, including books, uniforms, supplies, and transportation.<sup>[41]</sup>

The World Bank has estimated that the combined effects of lower income due to reduced employment and increases in consumption prices due to supply chain disruptions inflicted a heavy toll on household welfare, and that in 2019 household welfare in the South-West and in the North-West regions was lower by 13.2 % and 21.2 %, respectively compared to prior to the crisis.<sup>[42]</sup>

The Cameroonian government and members of the international community began to respond strongly to the crisis in 2019, approximately three years after it started.

Amid increasing violence and sustained international pressure, President Paul Biya held a national dialogue, from September 30 to October 4, 2019, to address the Anglophone crisis. The dialogue, led by Prime Minister Joseph Dion Ngute, was attended by more than 1,000 delegates including government officials, clergy, teachers, and representatives of civil society.<sup>[43]</sup> However, main separatist groups, as well as major political opposition parties,<sup>[44]</sup> did not attend, and some opposition political leaders walked out in protest.<sup>[45]</sup>

The dialogue did not include victims of human rights abuses in the Anglophone regions.[\[46\]](#)

The dialogue resulted in a special status for the two Anglophone regions to re-enforce the autonomy of administrative areas.[\[47\]](#) The dialogues final report did not address human rights and accountability issues.[\[48\]](#)

The government held peace talks with detained leaders of the Ambazonia Interim Government (Sisiku) separatist group in April and July 2020.[\[49\]](#)

In a September 20, 2021, press release, Col. Cyrille Atonfack Nguemo, the army spokesperson, said that attacks carried out by separatist groups in September 2021 with the use of weapons that included improvised explosive devices and rocket launchers are largely the result of separatists joining forces with other terrorist entities operating outside the countrys borders and announced a paradigm change in ongoing military operations.[\[50\]](#) Contacted by the BBC, Atonfack refused to provide more information about any groups allegedly collaborating with and supporting the Anglophone separatist fighters.[\[51\]](#)

Addressing the general debate of the 76th Session of the UN General Assembly on September 27, 2021, Lejeune Mbella Mbella, Minister for Foreign Affairs, speaking on behalf of President Paul Biya, said Cameroon is maintaining efforts in the North-West and South-West regions to end the socio-political tensions fueled by armed groups. He added that measures taken by the government following the national dialogue, including the creation of a commission for the promotion of bilingualism and multiculturalism, the granting of a special status to the Anglophone regions, a disarmament, demobilization and reintegration program, a humanitarian assistance plan and a reconstruction plan, are already making tangible results with a gradual return to peace, that despite some isolated acts of banditry perpetrated by armed gangs, the situation is improving, and that our defense and security forces have been deployed on the ground to protect the population and their property with professionalism and respect for human rights.[\[52\]](#)

The key actions of UN, European, and US actors are highlighted below.

March 2019: Thirty-eight members of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) expressed deep concern about the deteriorating human rights situation in Anglophone regions and called on Cameroon to engage fully with the OHCHR.[\[53\]](#)

April 2019: The European Parliament passed a resolution condemning violence in the Anglophone regions, expressing concern at the governments failure to hold security forces accountable.[\[54\]](#)

May 2019: The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) visited Cameroon, met national authorities, and raised concerns over human rights abuses in the Anglophone regions as well as the lack of access for human rights workers.[\[55\]](#) The UN Security Council organized an informal session on the humanitarian situation in Cameroon,[\[56\]](#) putting the situation in Cameroon on Council members radars.[\[57\]](#)

July 2019: Switzerland agreed to mediate talks between Cameroonian authorities and separatists.[\[58\]](#)

October 2019: The US cut Cameroons trade privileges, citing persistent human rights violations in the country, including in the Anglophone regions.[\[59\]](#)

February 2020: The UN Secretary-General, his special advisers, and the UNHCHR raised concerns over human rights abuses.[\[60\]](#)

January 2021: The Vaticans secretary of state visited Cameroon and expressed the Roman Catholic Churchs willingness to facilitate dialogue between the government and separatists.[\[61\]](#)

May 2021: For the first time, the UN Secretary-General included the situation in Cameroons North-West and South-West regions as a situation of concern in his annual report to the UN Security Council on children and armed conflict.

June 2021: The UN Secretary-General condemned the violence against civilians, schools, and UN and humanitarian personnel and property in the Anglophone regions. He encouraged Cameroonian authorities to prioritize and promote inclusive dialogue and reconciliation.[\[62\]](#)

June 2021: The US secretary of state announced visa restrictions on individuals who are believed to be responsible for, or complicit in, undermining the peaceful resolution of the crisis in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon. He also condemned human rights violations and threats against advocates and humanitarian workers.[\[63\]](#)

On November 25, 2021, the European Parliament adopted a resolution condemning rights abuses in Cameroon and urging the EU to work with regional actors including the AU and ECOWAS to facilitate dialogue. The Parliament urged, among others, the Cameroonian government and the leaders of separatist groups to agree on a humanitarian ceasefire and encouraged both parties to agree on confidence-building measures, such as freeing non-violent political prisoners and lifting school boycotts.[\[64\]](#)

They [the amba boys] say: Dont send your children to school. Its not safe. They tell us theres too much insecurity and soldiers cannot be trusted. If they get shot, it will be your fault. When Ambazonia will be freed, well run the schools and you will send your children there. Thats what they have told parents.

At the beginning of the crisis in late 2016, as part of a civil disobedience campaign to create a new Anglophone nation called Ambazonia, Anglophone activist groups viewed a school boycott as a means to protest the perceived breakdown of the Anglophone regions separate education system and its assimilation into the French-speaking system.[\[66\]](#) However, by the end of 2017, separatist leaders started using school boycotts to disrupt normal life in the Anglophone regions, as leverage in negotiations with the Cameroonian government, and to mobilize international attention to the crisis unfolding in the North-West and South-West regions.[\[67\]](#)

Since 2017, armed separatists have consistently targeted school buildings and killed, kidnapped, assaulted, harassed, and threatened education officials and students for failing to comply with separatists demands to boycott education.[\[68\]](#)

According to Peter, a 24-year-old former separatist fighter affiliated with a group known as Asawana: [Our generals] made us think it was nice and important to shut down schools They said that if schools are going on, the world will think that there is no crisis in the Anglophone regions.[\[69\]](#)

Most Anglophone separatists are organized around three main political bodies that have armed wings operating in both the North-West and South-West regions:

Ambazonia Interim Government (Sisiku), led by Sisiku Julius Ayuk Tabe, who is serving a life sentence for terrorism and secession charges at a high-security prison in Yaounde.[\[70\]](#)

Ambazonia Interim Government (Sako), a splinter faction led by Samuel Ikome Sako, a pastor based in the US;[\[71\]](#) and

Ambazonia Governing Council, led by Norway-based Ayaba Cho Lucas.[\[72\]](#)

The armed factions linked to the two Interim Governments are known as the Ambazonia Restoration Forces, which do not have a clear command structure and consist of various groups, such as the Terminators of Ambazonia, the Bui Warriors, the Red Dragons, and the Buffaloes of Bali, etc.[\[73\]](#) The armed wing of the Ambazonia Governing Council is the Ambazonia Defence Forces (ADF), headed by Benedict Kuah.

There are also several other smaller separatist groups that do not fall under the three main groups, including:

African Peoples Liberation Movement, which is led by US-based Ebenezer Derek Mbongo Akwanga and whose armed wing is the Southern Cameroons Defence Forces (SOCADEF);[\[74\]](#)

British Southern Cameroons Resistance Forces, headed by General RK; and

Tigers of Ambazonia, headed by Chia Martin aka Tiger 1.[\[75\]](#)

As of 2019, there were approximately 2,000 to 4,000 separatist fighters in the Anglophone regions.[\[76\]](#)

In public statements and communications with Human Rights Watch, most separatist groups provided two main reasons for the school boycott: it is not safe for students to go to school due to violence, and the education provided in government schools is substandard and biased.

The Ambazonia Governing Council and its senior leadership have repeatedly stated that it will not allow schools managed by the Cameroonian government to function in the English-speaking regions.[\[77\]](#) In a May 26, 2021 official letter in response to Human Rights Watchs questions about the Ambazonia Governing Councils position on school resumption, its leader, Ayaba Cho Lucas, wrote:

In a September 30, 2021 official letter in response to a request for information by Human Rights Watch, Akoson Raymond, secretary of the Department of Human Rights & Humanitarian Services of the Ambazonia Governing Council, said:

The People of Ambazonia have collectively rejected Cameroons colonial educational system. The Ambazonia Governing Council [AGovC] champions for the resumption of classes under an Ambazonian educational system. That is why, following the call of school boycott, the AGovC presented an alternative learning system under community schools run and managed by Ambazonians. Currently, Ambazonia boasts of fifty-four community schools throughout its territory.[\[79\]](#)

On May 19, 2021, Ebenezer Derek Mbongo Akwanga, chairman of the African Peoples Liberation Movement and head of its armed wing (the Southern Cameroons Defence Forces), disapproved the resumption of government schools: We support the education of our people, but we do not support a brain-wash educational system that has been imposed on our people for more than 60 years.[\[80\]](#)

In a September 29, 2021, official letter in response to a request for information by Human Rights Watch, Dr. Jonathan Levy, Akwangas legal representative, said:

On May 18, 2021, Sisiku Ayuk Tabe, the jailed president of the Ambazonia Interim Government, [\[82\]](#) told Human Rights Watch: We wish to see peace return to Southern Ambazonia so that our children can attend school in a nation that can guarantee their safety, security, and prospects for unadulterated and good quality education within a meritocratic and prosperous nation.[\[83\]](#)

In a letter dated November 29, 2021, Sisiku vociferously objected to Human Rights Watch's attribution of responsibility for many of the attacks on education to armed separatist groups, and among other things, stated:

On September 30, 2020, the president of the splinter faction of the Interim Government, Samuel Ikome Sako, tweeted that school resumption can only take place after the establishment of a negotiated ceasefire or safe school zones supervised by the United Nations.[\[85\]](#)

In a September 27, 2021 Zoom call with Human Rights Watch, Christopher Anu, the spokesperson of the Ambazonia Interim Government (Sako), said:

On November 12, 2021, Anu announced a renewed ban on all schools across the Anglophone regions, threatening violence against teachers, students, and school owners who violate the order.[\[87\]](#)

At the beginning of the 2020-2021 academic year, activists in different separatist groups, including Eric Tataw and Mark Bareta, changed their positions from opposing to supporting school resumption.[\[88\]](#) On September 28, 2020, Tataw urged the reopening of schools on Twitter: Im unapologetically asking all Ambazonian fighters & activists [to] join me in the crusade to allow school resumption.[\[89\]](#) On September 29, 2020, Bareta tweeted: School boycott is no longer a weapon of our struggle for independence. Thus, where possible, Ambazonia Forces should allow education and even encourage [going to] schools.[\[90\]](#)

Many of my students do not wear school uniforms on their way to and back from school. If they wear them, they can be at risk of being spotted by the separatist fighters on the road and attacked. Also, they don't use school bags. They put their books and notebooks in shopping bags like those we use to go to the market to buy food. Some also prefer to leave their books in my office. These are some of the coping strategies students have developed to keep safe.

Over 500 students have been attacked in the Anglophone regions by separatist fighters since 2017, according to reports from the UN and other credible organizations, as well as Human Rights Watch research. Human Rights Watch documented in detail 20 of those attacks which involved threats, intimidation, harassment, physical assaults, kidnapping, and even killings of students to force them to stop attending school. Human Rights Watch documented the kidnapping by separatist fighters of 255 students, including 78 who were taken from their school in Nkwen, North-West region, in November 2018, and 170 from their boarding school in Kumbo, North-West region, in February 2019.[\[92\]](#) In some cases, both in and outside of schools, attackers destroyed or seized students' books, documents, or notebooks. Many students told Human Rights Watch that they go to school without wearing their uniforms for fear of being spotted and attacked by separatist fighters.

Students Human Rights Watch interviewed believed their attackers were separatist fighters because of their clothing (plainclothes or just military pants or camouflage t-shirts as opposed to full uniforms), accessories (including amulets), types of weapons (such as hunting guns and machetes), language (Pidgin English, English, and local dialects), statements that students should not go to school and schools should be closed, and extortion tactics commonly used by separatist fighters. When kidnappings occurred, the perpetrators took their victims to camps in often remote areas as opposed to police, gendarmerie, or military stations or barracks one of the common tactics used by armed separatists.

A 25-year-old high school student, Steve, said that five separatist fighters, armed with guns and machetes, kidnapped him and four other students, between 21 and 22 years old, including one woman, early in the morning on their way to school:

Steve was released after two weeks. He said he was too afraid to return to school and hid in the bush for four months before relocating to Limbe, South-West region, where he now works as a driver and lives with a relative.[\[94\]](#)

Suspected separatist fighters carried out an assault at the University of Buea football field and kidnapped at least 15 male football players from the university's team.[\[95\]](#) Prior to the incident, on social media, suspected separatists had warned Anglophone teams to stay out of competitions organized by the Cameroonian government.[\[96\]](#) The students, some of whom were beaten, were released the following day, and the military arrested at least 10 suspects about a week later.[\[97\]](#) It is unclear whether a ransom was paid to secure the students' freedom.[\[98\]](#) The fate of the 10 suspects is also unknown, although Human Rights Watch has sought information on their fate from the government.

Six separatist fighters kidnapped Veronica, a 23-year-old University of Buea student, at about 3:30 p.m. They took her to an abandoned school in Bomaka neighborhood and sexually assaulted her before taking her to their camp in the bush, where they threatened her with death. They released her the next day following a ransom payment of 500,000 CFA (US\$933). Veronica said:

Following the incident, she relocated to Limbe, South-West region for safety. She later returned to Buea to resume her studies in January 2020.[\[100\]](#)

On January 30, 2020, armed separatists kidnapped Marie, a 19-year-old secondary school student, in Buea, in Cameroon's Anglophone South-West region, on her way back from school. Three days later, they chopped her finger off with a machete.[\[101\]](#)

Marie said the separatists also maimed a 19-year-old man who was held with her and also accused of attending school. Both students were released on February 3, after a ransom payment.

Human Rights Watch also reviewed photographs showing Marie's finger wrapped in a bandage after medical treatment.

According to media reports, an explosive device thrown on to the roof of a lecture hall at the University of Buea wounded at least 11 students.[\[103\]](#)

No one claimed responsibility for the attack, but media quoted two security sources as saying that the authorities suspected it was carried out by separatist groups.[\[104\]](#) While Horace Manga Ngomo, the University vice-chancellor, said that "an investigation will tell us who the perpetrators are."[\[105\]](#)

Separatist fighters assaulted Tim, a 21-year-old student, on his way to school in Kumbo.[\[106\]](#) He recounted his experience: They beat me up near my head. They punched me. They told me, Why are you going to school? Schools should be shut. Why are you stubborn? I still have a scar on the back of my head as a result of the beatings.[\[107\]](#) His mother knew about her sons' beating and independently informed Human Rights Watch about this incident.[\[108\]](#)

Sara, 21, dropped out of school and fled Ndu town in 2017 because separatist fighters had occupied her school and increased their threats against teachers and students. While moving to Yaoundé to continue her education in January 2018, separatist fighters targeted her:

Carl, a 24-year-old former University of Bamenda student, said armed separatists who identified themselves as fighters from the group SOCADEF kidnapped, threatened, and tried to recruit him in Njinikej. They held him in their camp for three days. He believed separatist fighters targeted him not only because of his studies, but also because his uncle is a government official.[\[110\]](#)

Less than a month later, on January 2, 2019, four SOCADEF fighters went to his house, did not find him, and threatened his mother. Carl said, She told me that they left a very clear message that if I didn't join their group, there would be consequences. For his safety and because he wanted to study, he and his mother decided he needed to leave Cameroon.[\[111\]](#)

Sam, now 15, described how three separatist fighters with guns and knives stopped him on his way back from school, the Government Bilingual High School Bamenda:

Six separatist fighters who had guns and said they belonged to the group known as 7Kata, kidnapped an 18-year-old student on his way to the Government Bilingual High School Bamenda. He said they took him to their camp, tied him up, tortured him, and held him captive for four days:

They released him following a ransom payment of 70,000 CFA (\$130), but they first cut off the part of his national identity card bearing Cameroon's national flag. One of his classmates witnessed the kidnapping but managed to run away.[\[114\]](#)

Armed separatists kidnapped three female students in Bamenda's Ntarikon neighborhood on their way home from school. The students, who were 14, 18, and 20 years old at that time, attended Government Bilingual High School Ntamulung, about one kilometer from where they were kidnapped. The armed separatists blindfolded the students, took them to a separatist camp in Ntanka village, and beat them.

Human Rights Watch spoke with one of the students, Maria, her parents,[\[115\]](#) and a witness to the kidnapping.[\[116\]](#) Maria recounted her experience:

The students were released on November 7, 2019, following a ransom payment of 1,130,000 CFA (\$2,100).

Jim, a 24-year-old University of Bamenda student, said that separatist fighters stormed his university residence in Bambili, Bamenda, and kidnapped him and at least eight other students. Because May 20 commemorates the 1972 presidential decision to abolish the federal system and form one nation state, separatists declared it a ghost town day. Jim said:

The armed separatists took the students to two camps, the first of which was an abandoned school, and kicked, slapped, and beat the soles of the students' feet with machetes. The fighters released the students after five days following ransom payments ranging from 100,000 CFA (\$186) to 500,000 CFA (\$933).[\[119\]](#)

Four separatist fighters threatened to kill a 14-year-old student, beating him on his way to Progressive Comprehensive High School. He said:

Three separatist fighters threatened to kidnap a 20-year-old student on his way to the Government Technical High School in Bamenda. He told Human Rights Watch:

This incident occurred four days after Christopher Anu, the spokesperson of the Ambazonia Interim Government, a separatist group, announced the renewal of the boycott of all schools across the Anglophone regions, threatening violence against teachers, students, and school owners who violate the boycott.[\[122\]](#) The renewal of the boycott was made following the death of schoolgirl, Brandy Tataw, caused by a police officer in Bamenda on November 12.[\[123\]](#)



Armed separatists in the Anglophone regions have recruited children into their groups and used them to support their operations.<sup>[124]</sup> The ongoing violence, separatists threats against students and youth, the frustrations caused by military abuses, and the need for survival have all increased schoolchildrens risk of recruitment by separatist armed groups. While living among separatist fighters, children may experience violence, may be required to participate in stressful initiation and training ceremonies, and may be forced to take dangerous drugs.

However, due to poor documentation and reporting by Cameroonian authorities, as well as verification difficulties faced by both national and international monitors, there are no available figures about how many children are being used by armed separatist groups in the Anglophone regions.

Accounts from people who were kidnapped and taken to separatist camps reveal that children are present inside armed separatist groups. Human Rights Watch also reviewed photographs and video footage showing people who look like children with guns, standing with other older-looking separatist fighters. However, we were unable to determine if these children were students when they were recruited. Due to the difficulties in identifying current, or even former, child soldiers or recruits who may experience stigma and fear of retaliation Human Rights Watch did not speak to any for this report.

Some students voluntarily took up arms. One teacher said that after her school in Kombone Bakundu, South-West region shut down in December 2017, several of her former male students, who were under 18 when the school closed, joined armed separatist groups. She fled Kombone Bakundu and has not returned since because, she said:

Others Human Rights Watch interviewed observed school-age children in separatist camps. One kidnapped teacher recognized one child who was fighting with the separatist as his former high school student.<sup>[126]</sup> Boris saw 10 fighters, all very young, with guns, machetes, sticks some of them were certainly below 18 years old at a separatist camp.<sup>[127]</sup> Maria observed not only men and women, but also boys and girls between 10 and 14 years old equipped with guns, knives, cutlasses, slings, and spears.<sup>[128]</sup> Ida witnessed that, out of approximately 20 fighters, many were just little boys of 15 years of age or so participating in training and ritual ceremonies.<sup>[129]</sup> In another camp, Veronica saw a 15 or 16-year-old boy among the eight fighters there.<sup>[130]</sup>

Caro Louise Ndielle, a 4-year-old girl, was killed by a bullet fired by a gendarme, as she was sitting in a vehicle on her way to school in Bueas Molyko neighborhood, South-West region. An angry mob responded to the killing by lynching the gendarme.<sup>[131]</sup>

In a press release issued on the same day, Colonel Cyrille Serge Atonfack Guemo, the army spokesperson, said gendarmes at a checkpoint stopped the vehicle Caro Louise was travelling in, but the driver refused to comply.<sup>[132]</sup> In an inappropriate reaction [] one of the gendarmes will fire warning shots in order to immobilize the vehicle, the press release stated, adding that in the process Caro Louise was fatally shot in the head.<sup>[133]</sup> Atonfack also said in the press release that an investigation has been opened by the local administrative authorities and the defense and security forces to shed more light on and establish responsibilities in this incident.<sup>[134]</sup>

Brandy Tataw, an 8-year-old schoolgirl, was killed by a bullet fired by a police officer as she was walking down a road in Bamenda, North-West region, on her way back from school.

In a November 12 news release, Martin Mbarga Nguete, the national security delegate general and Cameroonian police chief, said that Tataw was hit as she was walking down the street by a ricochet bullet a policeman had fired at a car that failed to stop at a police checkpoint.<sup>[135]</sup> Nguete also announced that an investigation had been opened into the killing of Tataw and that the policeman believed to have fired the shot had been arrested.

The killing of Tataw sparked protests in Bamenda, where hundreds of people took to the streets calling for justice for the police killing of the child. Cameroonian soldiers used excessive and lethal force, including live bullets, to disperse the protesters, injuring at least seven of them.<sup>[136]</sup>

When [the separatist fighters] were torturing me because of my profession, I thought that they were attacking the whole sector. I am not just one victim it's the education sector which is under attack.

At least 100 education professionals have been attacked by separatist fighters since 2017, according to reports by the UN and other credible organizations, as well as Human Rights Watch research. Human Rights Watch has documented in detail 12 attacks against teachers, principals, school staff, and other education professionals. These attacks have included killings, physical assaults, kidnappings, extortion, threats, and other forms of intimidation.

Teachers Human Rights Watch interviewed believed their attackers were separatist fighters because of their clothing (plainclothes or just military pants or camouflage t-shirts as opposed to full uniforms), accessories (including amulets), types of weapons (such as hunting guns and machetes), language (Pidgin English, English, and local dialects), and statements accusing educators of teaching (including by saying teaching is a crime) and saying that schools should be closed. Finally, when kidnappings occurred, the perpetrators took their victims to camps in often remote areas as opposed to police, gendarmerie, or military stations or barracks one of the common tactics used by armed separatists.

Public school teachers, being government workers, appear to be the main targets of separatist fighters. However, Human Rights Watch also documented separatist fighters attacks on teachers at private schools, such as at Kulu Memorial College and the Mother Francisca International Bilingual Academy.

Separatist fighters kidnapped the owner of the Community Christian College.<sup>[138]</sup> They identified themselves as separatist fighters, accused him of teaching and not respecting the boycott order, took him to their camp, and slapped his face before releasing him four days later after a ransom payment of 1 million CFA (US\$1,866). Separatist fighters had already harassed him and extorted food and 80,000 CFA (\$149) from him in a previous encounter. They said that I had to support their struggle for independence and help them buy weapons, he said.<sup>[139]</sup>

Four separatist fighters came to the house of Clara, the head teacher at a government nursery school in Bachou Akagbei village, at about 8 p.m. They said they were separatist fighters, accused her of teaching, and ordered her to stop. She gave them 30,000 CFA (\$56) when they demanded their own share of the government money [she] was receiving as a salary. They then cut her with a machete all over: on her back, neck, elbow, and hands, almost completely chopping off her right hand, which she later had amputated.<sup>[140]</sup> The teachers neighbor rushed to the scene right after the assault and took her to a hospital for treatment.<sup>[141]</sup>

According to Clara and one of her neighbors, security forces arrested at least one perpetrator and identified him as a separatist fighter. He is held at the Buea central prison while his trial is ongoing at time of writing.<sup>[142]</sup>

Clara has not been able to resume teaching as she is physically incapacitated and feels psychologically down. She also expressed concern for her children, particularly her 19-year-old daughter who witnessed the incident.<sup>[143]</sup>

Seven separatists, some with machetes and others with guns, broke into the home of Aster, a 31-year-old teacher at about 4 a.m., and assaulted her for committing the crime of teaching. I tried to beg them, but they did not show mercy and cut my right leg with machetes before running away, she said. She later had her leg amputated at a hospital in Douala, more than 50 kilometers away.<sup>[144]</sup> Three others corroborated the victims account, and Human Rights Watch reviewed a photograph taken by one of the victims relatives showing her almost completely severed and bleeding leg.<sup>[145]</sup>

Separatist fighters kidnapped 17 teachers, including 11 women, at about 8 p.m. while the teachers were heading to a meeting organized by the school administration.<sup>[146]</sup> The armed separatists beat the teachers before releasing them at about 3 a.m. on September 1, 2019. One teacher, Boris, recounted his experience:

Two separatist fighters killed a 58-year-old University of Bamenda teacher, Paulinus Song<sup>[148]</sup> who they had previously threatened and accused of being a traitor for not complying with their school boycott. When the teacher told the separatists that he needed to teach to make a living, they demanded 500,00 CFA (US\$933), but he could not afford to pay.<sup>[149]</sup>

A witness to the killing said:

Separatist fighters, who said they were from a group known as Mountain Lions, kidnapped a teacher from his home at 7:30 a.m., for refusing to hoist the Ambazonia flag outside his community school. At their camp, he said he found 16 other hostages, including other teachers and parents of students. They beat the soles of his feet with machetes for the three consecutive days and hit his arms and back. About a month later, on September 3, they released him following a ransom payment of 300,000 CFA (US\$560), which he needed to borrow.<sup>[151]</sup>

A farmer witnessed eight separatist fighters kidnap the teacher in broad daylight: This teacher has been a community teacher for a long time and has invested a lot to improve the lives of the children in the Bafia community. His kidnapping came as a shock to the community.<sup>[152]</sup>

When Human Rights Watch spoke with the teacher, he had stopped teaching for fear of being kidnapped again. He had instead begun farming and selling plantains for a living.<sup>[153]</sup>

Three separatist fighters broke into the home of a teacher at the Government Bilingual Grammar School in Bueas Molyko neighborhood and threatened to harm her if she did not boycott school on Mondays, their designated ghost town strike day.<sup>[154]</sup> She recounted what happened:

At about 4 p.m., two separatist fighters attacked Florence, a 48-year-old government teacher in Wum, on her way back home from school, along with her husband.

They shot several times at the couple, who were riding a motorbike, injuring Florence in the arms and legs and her husband in the chest, neck, and abdomen, before running away.

Despite the injuries, the couple made it to the Wum district hospital where they received medical assistance.

Human Rights Watch spoke with Florence and her husband and reviewed photographs showing their wounds, as well as medical records issued by the hospital.

Florence's husband said that, while he was being treated at the hospital, separatist fighters called him on his phone and said they attacked him and his wife because Florence was a teacher. They said the reason beyond the attack was my wife's job. They said she should not be teaching. They said schools should be shut down. <sup>[156]</sup>

Florence and her husband left Wum after the attack. Florence is no longer teaching.

Armed separatists kidnapped Ida, a 55-year-old high school teacher at the Government Bilingual High School Bamenda, and her husband at about 6 a.m. from their home in Mankon, a community in Bamenda. [\[158\]](#) They took her and her husband to their camp, threatened them with death, and accused Ida of going to school. They were released after 12 hours following a ransom payment of 500,000 CFA (US\$933). Ida described their experience:

Eight separatist fighters, wearing plainclothes and *gris-gris* amulets and carrying guns, stopped a bus at a checkpoint between Njinikom and Belo. They checked all 17 passengers ID cards and bags and pulled out Andrew, a teacher, and three others (two men and a woman). They took these four to their camp, shot Andrew in the left leg, and released him four days later. He spent six months getting treatment at the hospital. He recounted his ordeal after the fighters found his teaching certificate:

Human Rights Watch reviewed a photograph sent by the teacher showing wounds consistent with his account.

Separatist fighters with hunting guns, knives, and pistols believed to be locally fabricated stopped a teacher at a checkpoint in Takija, searched his bag, found school materials revealing he was a teacher, and then kidnapped and tortured him at their camp, including by burning his body all over with a lighter. They released him six days later following a ransom payment of 700,000 CFA (\$1,191). He recalled what happened:

Ida, who had been kidnapped in February 2019, was the victim of another attack on January 12, 2021. She said a group of gunmen, whom she believed were armed separatists because of how they were dressed and their weapons, shot her car and her abdomen on the busy road between Mankon and the military airport. She recounted:

Human Rights Watch reviewed 10 photographs of the teachers car showing the holes and destruction, including broken windows caused by the shooting, that are consistent with her account. Human Rights Watch also reviewed medical records issued by a hospital in Bamenda stating the teacher had been treated for a gunshot wound in the abdomen on January 12, 2021.

Schools are supposed to be places of peace, where we, the students, learn, play, socialize. But this has not been the case in the Anglophone regions. Schools have become a battlefield.

Since 2017, armed separatists have attacked at least 70 schools according to reports from United Nations agencies, the World Bank, Cameroonian and international civil society organizations, and media outlets [\[164\]](#) to enforce their education boycott in the Anglophone regions. They would open fire on school property, set classrooms and school offices ablaze, destroy school windows, doors, walls, and roofs, burn school records, books, and other materials, pillage, and steal school fees. [\[165\]](#) Armed separatists have also conducted threatening visits, ordering schools to be closed and in some cases kidnapping students and teachers. [\[166\]](#)

Some attacks on schools occurred at functioning schools, with students and teachers either inside classrooms or outside the school building, putting them at risk of injury or death. Teachers described scenes of students screaming, crying, and running away in panic, and students recounted the fear and anxiety they experienced during attacks.

Human Rights Watch documented in detail 15 attacks on schools by armed separatist fighters between January 2017 and November 2021. In many of the attacks, perpetrators did not identify themselves as separatist fighters, and no group claimed responsibility. However, people Human Rights Watch interviewed believed the attacks were committed by separatist fighters because of their clothing (plainclothes or military pants with camouflage t-shirts as opposed to full uniforms), accessories (amulets), types of weapons (hunting guns and machetes), language (Pidgin English, English, or local dialects), and statements that schools should be boycotted and closed. In one other case documented in this report, evidence suggests that Cameroon security forces burned down and destroyed a school building which had been used by armed separatist groups.

This boarding high school for approximately 200 female students shut down in October 2017 following increasing threats by separatist fighters, including a raid earlier that month. Human Rights Watch spoke with two students who were present during the raid. [\[167\]](#) Nina, 19, recalled: They didnt shoot but used stones and machetes to break the windows of the school. We did not see the amba, but we heard the screams and felt the panic. [\[168\]](#)

Human Rights Watch also reviewed two videos showing the abandoned school.

Unknown gunmen stormed this private school in Kumbas Fiango neighborhood at about 11 a.m., killing 7 children and injuring at least 13 others. [\[169\]](#) On the day of the attack, Cameroons communications minister announced the opening of an investigation. [\[170\]](#)

As of October 2021, the government has not made any information regarding the investigation public. The school shut down immediately after the attack and remains closed at time of writing.

On September 7, a military tribunal in Cameroon sentenced four people to death by firing squad for the Kumba school attack, however there are very serious concerns about how the four accused and eight other defendants were identified, the absence of credible evidence against them, and the manner in which the trial was conducted in violation of international fair trial standards. [\[171\]](#) In addition to the use of a military tribunal to try civilians, and the imposition of the death penalty, the trial was marred by serious procedural irregularities, including the impossibility for the defense to cross examine witnesses; the lack of translation of proceedings from English or French into the Pidgin English spoken by most of the defendants; and lack of due process with respect to the detention of the accused. [\[172\]](#)

The court found the four guilty of terrorism, secession, hostility against the fatherland, murder, possession of illegal arms and ammunition, and insurrection. It sentenced four other defendants to five months in jail and a fine of 50,000 CFA (US\$89) for allegedly failing to report receipt of a threat from separatist fighters. The court acquitted four others.

At about 8 a.m., at least 10 separatist fighters with guns and machetes attacked this private school. [\[173\]](#) They forced about 20 schoolchildren and 4 teachers who were present to undress and beat some of them before releasing them and burning down the principals office and another office.

Human Rights Watch spoke with two teachers who were present during the attack as well as the principal of the school, who arrived at the scene soon after the attack. [\[174\]](#) One teacher, Julia, said:

The other teacher added that the separatist fighters collected their petrol-doused clothes and put them into two school offices before setting the offices on fire. [\[176\]](#) Human Rights Watch also reviewed video footage of the attack. [\[177\]](#)

At about 10 a.m., a group of suspected separatist fighters attacked the school, which had already been closed since 2017 due to the ongoing crisis, and partially burned at least one of the classrooms. Two witnesses [\[178\]](#) said they saw several gunmen, whom they identified as separatist fighters, enter the school, located in Muyukas Balong neighborhood, before seeing

smoke coming out from the building. They also said that soldiers intervened, firing at the assailants who ran away.

When the gunfire stopped, I walked into the school and saw the burned classroom, one of the witnesses said. Residents of the area helped extinguish the fire. [\[179\]](#)

Human Rights watch also reviewed four photographs taken by a resident of Muyuka in the aftermath of the attack and showing the burned classroom.

Unidentified gunmen stormed the school, killed four children and one female teacher [\[180\]](#) and injured at least five other children. The attack unfolded in broad day light, during classes, at about 7:45 AM.

A woman living near the school told Human Rights Watch: I heard multiple gunshots and then a loud explosion. I didnt know what was going on. I lay down on the floor. An hour later, I was informed about the attack at the school. I am still in shock. The Government Bilingual High School is the biggest school in town, with about 1000 students. [\[181\]](#)

A member of a humanitarian organization and resident of Ekondo Titi said:

Another woman from Ekondo Titi who knew two of the children killed, and rushed to the two hospitals where the casualties were transferred after the attack, said:

According to the Ekondo Titi residents interviewed by Human Rights Watch, there was no presence of security personnel around the school at the time of the attack. The residents however said that there is a police station, a gendarmerie base, and an army base in Ekondo Titi. [\[184\]](#)

The attack, which sparked national [\[185\]](#) and international [\[186\]](#) condemnation, led to the temporary suspension of all school activities in Ekondo Titi. [\[187\]](#)

No one claimed responsibility for the attack, but Aboloo Timothe, the Divisional Officer of Ekondo Titi Subdivision, has blamed separatist fighters for the attack. [\[188\]](#)

Witnesses and Ekondo Titi residents who spoke to BBC News Pidgin said that, prior to the attack, separatist fighters had threatened to burn the school if it did not comply with their demands to shut down. [\[189\]](#)

In a November 12, 2021, statement, Capo Daniel, the deputy defense chief of the Ambazonia Defense Forces, a major separatist group, blamed The Expandable 100, another separatist group which he said is under the authority of Samuel Sako, the president of the Ambazonia Interim Government, for the attack. [\[190\]](#)

In a November 25, 2021, press release, Cyrille Serge Atonfack Guemo, the army spokesperson, blamed separatist fighters under the command of 10 Kobo for the attack. [\[191\]](#)

Human Rights Watch viewed a video purporting to show fighters from The Expandable 100 group and one of their leaders, known as 10 Kobo, who, speaking in Pidgin English, threatens to attack any school and any other place guarded by the military. Human Rights Watch was unable to verify the authenticity of the video. In the unauthenticated video, 10 Kobo states the date when the video was filmed: today, the 8<sup>th</sup> of the 9<sup>th</sup> month of 2021, which was the first week of the new academic year 2021-2022, suggesting that the context is consistent with the military seeking at the time to guard schools to allow their resumption.

In a November 25 Twitter post, prominent separatist activist Mark Bareta said that 10 Kobo has sent out an audio shaming [the Cameroon](#) military for killing the school kids and added that the fighter said he has no business with children or civilians, that his focus has always been military. [\[192\]](#)

Separatist fighters burned this school one night, between 9 and 10 p.m., in March or April 2017.<sup>[193]</sup> Thomas, a teacher, described the attack: They burned the staff room, the principals room, and the library. We rushed there but struggled to quell the fire. All school records, books, and other documents were burned. Even some computers were burned.<sup>[194]</sup>

A former student<sup>[195]</sup> of the school and a relative of another former student provided the same account of the events.<sup>[196]</sup>

It was a shock to see the library completely burned, said a 21-year-old female former student. For students like me who could not afford textbooks, those books in the library were very important.<sup>[197]</sup>

All three people Human Rights Watch interviewed about this incident believed that the perpetrators were separatist fighters because armed separatists had threatened to attack this school before and had attacked other schools in the area.

The high school, which had enrolled between 1,000 and 1,400 students before the crisis, finally shut down in 2018 and remained closed through at least late April 2021, as evidenced by two videos filmed at that time showing the abandoned school, the burned administrative block, and goats and cows grazing on the surrounding land, indicating the schools lack of use.

About 10 separatist fighters with guns and machetes raided the Government High School in Ashong village and threatened to kill eight teachers if they did not close the school. Human Rights Watch spoke with two teachers who witnessed the attack and a local official.<sup>[198]</sup> Students had stopped attending school weeks before, so they were not there during the attack. However, due to government pressure, teachers continued to go to school, and this school remained open without student even after the attack.<sup>[199]</sup>

A 32-year-old teacher recounted how at least six armed separatists disrupted a meeting to discuss the resumption of classes:

The teacher told Human Rights Watch that in and around Konene, there are several separatist armed groups, including the Ambazonia Defense Forces and the group headed by General RK, British Southern Cameroons Resistance Forces.<sup>[201]</sup>

Just before dawn, armed separatists stormed the boarding school in Nkwen and abducted 79 school children from their dormitories.<sup>[202]</sup> According to media reports, the students, aged 11-17, were kidnapped along with their principal, a teacher, and a driver.<sup>[203]</sup> All 79 students, as well as the principal, the teacher, and the driver, were eventually released on November 7.<sup>[204]</sup>

In May 2020, the government said that one of the alleged perpetrators, a separatist fighter known as General Alhaji, had been killed during a military operation.<sup>[205]</sup>

Armed separatists attacked these two Catholic schools, located in the same compound, twice.<sup>[206]</sup> The first time, in June 2020, they came at about 7:30 p.m. and forced teachers at gunpoint to hand over money and valuables, including telephones and computers. Then, they broke into a female secondary school dormitory and scared the girls to death because of their guns.<sup>[207]</sup> The second time, in September 2020, between 10 and 15 separatists armed with hunting guns and machetes and dressed in plain clothes came at about 6 p.m. They threatened the Catholic sisters managing the school and attempted to kidnap for ransom the abbess (the head nun), who the other sisters had hidden. No children were at school when this happened.<sup>[208]</sup> Both times, they identified themselves as separatists and warned the staff to stop teaching and close the school.

Separatist fighters attacked this school with more than 200 students present and kidnapped 11 teachers. They held and threatened the teachers in their camp in the bush before releasing them on November 6. Human Rights Watch spoke with Reverend Fonki Samuel Forba, the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Cameroon, and one of the abducted teachers.<sup>[209]</sup> International media reports corroborated their accounts.<sup>[210]</sup>

According to Forba: The children ran away in different directions, all very scared. The teachers were taken to a separatist camp far in the bush. While the teachers were not mistreated, they were given a warning that they should not teach, that the school should remain shut.<sup>[211]</sup> Residents of Kumbo suspect the kidnappers were separatist fighters, who have many camps in the area, and the Cameroonian government has blamed separatist fighters for the kidnappings.<sup>[212]</sup>

Armed separatists shot in the air and at the school gate, causing panic among students and teachers before the gendarmes, stationed inside the school, responded with gunfire. Human Rights Watch spoke with two teachers who were present during the attack.<sup>[213]</sup> One believed the presence of about seven gendarmes prompted the attack. He described the hostilities that ensued:

The other teacher had a similar experience: The amba came early, by the time the kids were entering the school gate. They started shooting in the air. They came to scare the students because they were going to school. I ran away with other teachers and students. Since this incident, I stopped teaching. Its just too risky.<sup>[215]</sup>

Human Rights Watch learned of one alleged attack on a school by Cameroonian security forces through a video posted on social media in January 2019 that shows a group of Cameroonian soldiers around a burning school building and an interview with a resident of Widikum town, North-West region.<sup>[216]</sup> The University of California, Berkeleys Human Rights Center and Bellingcat, an investigative journalism collective, geolocated the video, which appears to have been filmed in Eka village, North-West region.<sup>[217]</sup> While the video does not show who lit the fire, they found that the soldiers do not appear to be making a concerted effort to stop it.<sup>[218]</sup>

The resident of Widikum, a town near Eka, blamed soldiers for burning the school in retaliation for the separatists previous use of it as a camp.<sup>[219]</sup> A pro-government website also claimed that the army burnt the school because separatist fighters had used it as a base.<sup>[220]</sup>

The attack seriously damaged the school, which remains closed as of July 2021.

Schools are supposed to be safe havens when violence erupts. They are meant for children to learn and socialize. But we see too many schools being used by amba boys as camps and bases.

Separatist fighters have used scores of schools as bases and have held hostages, stored weapons and ammunitions, and deployed fighters in and near them, according to reports from the UN and other credible organizations.<sup>[222]</sup> A senior Cameroonian education official said in July 2019 that separatist fighters were occupying and using 53 schools as camps in the Anglophone regions.<sup>[223]</sup> In September 2020, the army announced they had chased separatist fighters from at least 100 schools in the North-West region alone.<sup>[224]</sup> Human Rights Watch received information about the occupation by separatist fighters of three schools in the South-West region and in previous reports documented the occupation by separatist fighters of four schools in the North-West region.<sup>[225]</sup>

A former separatist fighter, Peter, said his former group, the Asawana group, had occupied at least three schools in the South-West region. It used the government secondary school in Foe Bakundu for about two years, the government secondary school in Maromba for about three years, and the government secondary school in Bai Panya for about one year, he said. All schools were used for weapons storage and as disciplinary centers to physically punish villagers who violated separatist rules. The schools in Foe Bakundu and Maromba had prisons and offices, where villagers could lodge complaints, and the school

in Bai Panya functioned as a meeting site for Asawana fighters.<sup>[226]</sup> Human Rights Watch was unable to corroborate the occupation of these three schools.

Separatist fighters occupied the Government Primary and Nursery School in Tan village, in the North-West region, from at least 2018 to December 2019.<sup>[227]</sup> On December 8, 2019, at about 5:30 a.m., soldiers stormed it and killed at least six separatist fighters in the school.<sup>[228]</sup> Witnesses then saw soldiers damaging and looting the school. Textbooks had already been destroyed during the armed separatists occupation.<sup>[229]</sup> A community leader described the scene: There was a lot of shooting. Villagers escaped for their lives. I also ran away with my family and went to the bush, where I remained for about one week. When I came back with other villagers, we discovered the dead bodies [of separatist fighters] and buried them.<sup>[230]</sup>

Since December 2019, the school has been abandoned. Villagers and former teachers have started to repair the damage. Following the military intervention, we could finally enter the school to see what it had become, said a former teacher at the school. There was a lot of damage. He said two solar panels and kitchen utensils, like pots, were missing and the schools doors and roof were bullet-ridden.<sup>[231]</sup> Human Rights Watch reviewed photographs and videos taken in May 2021 showing the abandoned school, a classroom with broken benches and notebooks spread on the floor, and the destroyed doors and roof. Before the crisis erupted in late 2016, this school had up to 300 students, serving the local population as well as the nomadic Mbororo people in the area.<sup>[232]</sup>

The Cameroonian authorities have taken steps to respond to attacks on education, including by endorsing the Safe Schools Declaration in September 2018.<sup>[234]</sup> Countries that endorse the declaration agree to take steps to strengthen prevention and responses related to attacks on education.<sup>[235]</sup> The Cameroonian government has begun to fulfill its commitments under the Safe Schools Declaration by implementing some measures to maintain childrens access to education, with funding and support from donors and humanitarian organizations.<sup>[236]</sup>

The continuation of education during conflict is a commitment under the Safe Schools Declaration, and the Cameroonian government has attempted to revive education in the Anglophone regions with more pronounced back-to-school campaigns at the start of each new school year than the ones it executed during the pre-crisis period. Unfortunately, many teachers and independent analysts believe these back-to-school campaigns put the lives of students and teachers at risk by forcing them to go to school despite widespread insecurity.<sup>[237]</sup>

Tina, a teacher at the Government High School in Ashong village, North-West region, described how teachers must go to school, despite a lack of security, protection, and even students:

Before the beginning of the 2019-2020 academic year, the government launched a highly publicized back-to-school campaign.<sup>[239]</sup> Its next back-to-school campaign, before the start of the 2020-2021 academic year, came after nearly seven months of school closures across the country due to the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>[240]</sup> Attacks on education in the Anglophone regions escalated almost immediately after students physically returned to school in October 2020. Within weeks, a teacher was murdered, another one kidnapped,<sup>[241]</sup> and Human Rights Watch documented attacks on at least three schools (in Kumba, Kumbo, and Limbe).<sup>[242]</sup> Some students stopped going to school for months following these attacks, as parents were reluctant to send their children to school out of fear for their safety.<sup>[243]</sup>

Chris, a high school teacher in Buea, about 70 kilometers from Kumba, said that after information about the Kumba massacre spread, parents rushed to the school and literally took their children out of the classrooms. He described panic and commotion, even though we were far away from the location where the killings took place.<sup>[244]</sup>

Not only parents, but also teachers are afraid. It takes courage to teach, said a 36-year-old female teacher in Muea. Every morning, when I wake up and walk to school, I pray God that Ill return.<sup>[245]</sup>



On September 3, 2021, ahead of the resumption of the 2021 to 2022 academic year on September 6, the government also carried out a robust back-to-school campaign.

A post on the Facebook account of the defense minister stated: Education is a fundamental right. Children must go to school, above a cartoon showing a soldier holding a child by the hand. [246]

Cameroonian authorities said at least 400 schools reopened and 70,000 students have resumed their classes in the North-West and South-West for the new school year that began in September 2021. [247] Local media reported that authorities of both Anglophone regions recorded improvements in school attendance compared to the last academic year. [248]

Citing statistics from Cameroonian education authorities, UNOCHA reported that only a week only after the resumption of the new school year 2021-2022, 53 percent of secondary schools, 49 percent of primary schools and 47 percent of nursery schools were not functional in the South-West region, and only 23 percent of secondary schools were functional in the North-West region. [249]

Teachers and parents of students from both regions also told Human Rights Watch that the majority of schools remain shut.

A mother of two school children in Muyuka, South-West region, said:

In addition, separatist groups called for an 18-day lockdown from September 15 to October 2, 2021. [251]

According to the UN, as a result of the separatist-imposed lockdown all schools and community learning spaces were closed, except for some schools in a few urban areas which are operating at less than 60% of their capacity, compared to the first week of the 2021-2022 academic year. [252]

Schools were meant to open in September, but my kids are staying home. We are all staying home. The city is dead. We are afraid of breaking the lockdown. We dont want to run into troubles, a father of two in Kumba, South-West region, told Human Rights Watch. [253]

The Cameroonian government has frequently deployed security forces in or outside school premises in an attempt to increase security at schools in major urban centers, where schools are functioning. Following the November 10, 2021 attack on the Buea University for example, Bernard Okalia Bilai, governor of the South-West region, told the media that everyone should return to the school because the military has been deployed to protect students and staff members. [254] The responses have been mixed: some students and teachers told Human Rights Watch that they appreciated this form of protection, while others did not.

The *Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict*, which Cameroon endorsed through the Safe Schools Declaration, propose a sliding scale of interaction between security forces and school premises in response to security threats to schools:

While the *Guidelines* have been produced specifically for application during armed conflict, they may also be useful and instructive for comparable situations, including those with the potential to turn into armed conflict. [256]

Some teachers felt safer when security guards or security forces, such as police, gendarmes, and soldiers, were around their schools. Lily, a female teacher at the Government Bilingual Grammar School in Bueas Molyko neighborhood, expressed feeling more comfortable and safer due to the presence of about six security force personnel at the school gate and two or three on patrol. Private security guards replace the security forces at night. [257] At the Government Technical High School, also in Molyko neighborhood, there are at least two or three security force personnel around, including at night. Chris, a teacher there, said, I think it is good to have them around. I think without them we would be more exposed to attacks. Their presence deters attacks. [258] A private school teacher in Bueas Sandpit neighborhood was reassured and more protected by the presence of soldiers around the school. I feel safer, and I work better, he said. I hope theyll continue patrolling until the security situation improves. [259]

Some students felt safer too. Gendarmes are present in our school all the timethey sleep there, said a 20-year-old male student at the Government Technical High School in Bamenda. Their presence makes us feel safer. Its a guarantee of extra security during class time. I think they should remain there. [260]

Others were concerned about the deployment of security forces in and around their schools, citing fears that their presence would increase the risk of attacks by armed separatists. Some said that they feel uncomfortable in the presence of security forces because of their abusive reputation.

A teacher at the Higher Technical Teacher Training College in Kumba expressed fear of security forces patrolling the classrooms:

When separatist fighters targeted the Government Bilingual High School Atiela in Bamenda, one teacher believed separatist fighters attacked his school because gendarmes were stationed there for security purposes. As of June 2021, the school was functioning with gendarmes inside. [262]

Staff at the Community Christian College in Muea decided not to apply for soldiers to provide extra security because:

A 22-year-old student at the Saint Paul Comprehensive College, a private school in Nkwen village, Bamenda, said that private security guards generally provide security at her school. However, during the exam period from June 29 to July 13, 2021, security forces patrolled the school, likely to dissuade separatist fighters from attacking it. She said she preferred private security guards to government security forces:

Some found a compromise with the security forces. At the Government Nursery School Bokwoango in Buea, education staff asked the security forces to vacate the premises and instead conduct patrols around the school perimeter. The students were afraid, and we felt like we could become a target of the amba, a teacher explained. The security forces agreed to their request. [265]

The government has made efforts to address attacks on education in the Anglophone regions, however these efforts have not been sufficient to resolve issues related to security for schools in rural areas and on the way to and from schools and accountability for attacks on education has been almost non-existent. The government has also failed to address the lack of resources and overcrowding in schools hosting internally displaced students.

In times of armed conflict or comparable situations of persistent violence that threaten the safety of places of education, students, and staff, governments have an obligation to counter the risk and take feasible efforts to ensure the safety of places of learning and those in them. Provision of security to schools and universities should be undertaken in such a way that does not enhance their vulnerability to attack, for example by making them potential targets in an armed conflict, or for armed groups in an insurgency. The views of educational professionals, students, and parents, who should be regularly and formally consulted, should be taken into account in developing security plans for schools and universities.

Government forces deployed to provide security should also strictly observe international human rights law, and where applicable international humanitarian law, with zero tolerance of abuses against civilians so that staff and students alike can trust those providing security. As noted above, the Safe Schools Guidelines call for appropriately trained civilian personnel to be used to provide security if possible, and for armed forces only to be used where alternative means are not available.

Therefore, the Cameroonian government should consider a sliding scale of security measures in response to assessed risks to schools, students, and teachers. If possible, appropriately trained civilian personnel, such as guards and watchmen, should be used to provide security. Any decision to escalate to police, gendarmes, and then armed forces personnel, should be done only as a necessary and proportionate response to assessed risk.

If armed forces personnel are engaged in security tasks related to schools, their presence within school grounds or buildings should be avoided if at all possible, including for accommodation. Where feasible, establishing wider security perimeters in neighborhoods around schools, rather than directly outside schools, may minimize disruption to childrens education and avoid militarization of school or university grounds.

Similarly, where provision of security along routes traveled by teachers and students to and from schools is necessary, the government should consider the feasibility of conducting sweeps along the routes before and after the school day, rather than direct escorts.

Some schools that were attacked had no security protection or security forces had failed to respond adequately to early warning signs and threats of an attack. Some victims and witnesses expressed disappointment at the governments inaction.

For example, there was no government security police or otherwise near the private Mother Francisca International Bilingual Academy in Kumba when suspected separatist gunmen stormed the school and killed seven children in broad daylight on October 24, 2020. [266] It is a shame that no member of the security forces was present nearby the school at the time of the attack. [267] said a man whose 12-year-old daughter was shot and injured in the attack. Our children deserve better protection. [268]

In a statement in response to the incident, the government spokesperson said that the school only launched its activities at the start of the 2020-2021 school year, without the knowledge of the competent administrative authorities and could not benefit from the same security measures enjoyed by other schools. [269] However, according to Kumba residents and journalists, the school had been open for several years, but only government schools in Kumbanot private schoolshave security forces outside. [270]

When separatist fighters attacked the private Kulu Memorial College in Limbe less than two weeks later, that school was also unprotected. [271] There was no presence of security forces around the school at the time of the attack: no military, no gendarmes, no police, nothing, said Julia, a teacher there. The military only came after the attack when the gunmen had already disappeared. [272]

No law enforcement intervened during or after separatist fighters raided the Ashong public high school. [273] Tina, a teacher at the school felt the security forces did not care: There is a gendarmerie station in our community. But the gendarmes did not respond during or after the amba attack. Even in the following days, they did not come to ask us questions, to know what had happened to us. [274]

Despite repeated threats by separatists to disrupt the National Day on May 20, 2020, there were no security personnel in or around the University of Bamenda that day. Jim, who was kidnapped by separatist fighters, said: There is a military base just seven kilometers from [Bambili]. But no one intervened when we were kidnapped. No soldier came and no soldier was around the

university when the amba came. From what I have experienced, I think that [separatist] threats were overlooked or not taken seriously.[\[275\]](#)

Students and teachers should have not only safe schools, but also safe locales so they can go to and from school without being attacked. According to Lily, a public high school teacher:

In fact, all the students, teachers, and parents interviewed by Human Rights Watch who still go to school in the Anglophone regions had major concerns regarding the lack of security on the road to and from school.

When I see them leaving the house in the morning, I worry, I am nervous, said a father of two boys living in Bomaka, South-West region. I think about all the risks along the road and at school. We live in fear.[\[277\]](#)

Some parents have sought to mitigate these risks by arranging taxis for their schoolchildren, despite the cost.[\[278\]](#) One high school student in Bamenda described a common self-protection strategy used by many students: When I go to school, I don't wear my school uniform. I just wear my normal clothes. I am afraid of being spotted by the amba. I walk for about a kilometer, and I never feel safe.[\[279\]](#)

Most of the schools in the violence-affected areas, especially in rural areas where the presence of separatist groups is stronger, have been closed since 2017.[\[280\]](#) Some of the teachers, students, and families of students interviewed by Human Rights Watch thought that an increased military presence in rural communities would promote school resumption. Others believed that more security forces still would not allow classes to safely resume and could even heighten insecurity.

In Akeh village, a rural community in the North-West region where there are active separatist groups, a former senior education staffer at the Government High School, which has been closed since July 2018, believed a greater military presence would help schools safely resume. He thought that the creation of a military base or post could contribute to discouraging amba from attacking schools.[\[281\]](#)

Thomas, a public high school teacher, called for a comprehensive, political solution to address the complexities of school resumption:

As the number of IDPs in the Anglophone regions as well as in the Francophone Littoral, West, and Centre regions more than tripled from 160,000 in 2018 to nearly 600,000 in 2021,[\[283\]](#) both public and private schools in host towns suffered from overcrowding. Schools in urban centers are particularly overcrowded,[\[284\]](#) partly because internally displaced teachers, students, and parents felt that these places would be safer due to the heightened presence of security forces.[\[285\]](#) Consequently, many children moved, with or without their families, to those urban areas to more safely access education.[\[286\]](#) Teachers were also redeployed to main urban centers once their schools in the countryside shut down.[\[287\]](#)

In these urban centers, teachers, parents, and students Human Rights Watch interviewed identified overcrowding as a problem that stretched class sizes beyond their limit, resulting in 100 students in some classes when the pre-crisis sizes ranged from approximately 25 to 50 students per class, according to our research and schools struggling to accommodate everyone with only limited assistance from the government. A lack of material and human resources exacerbated this situation.

A teacher at the Government Bilingual Grammar school in Buea said that the student body increased by at least 1,000 since 2019 due to the arrival of displaced students. She expressed a need for additional classrooms, teachers, desks, benches, and school materials.[\[288\]](#) Another teacher working in Buea observed a steep increase in student numbers at the Government High School in Great Soppo neighborhood and at the Government Technical High School in Molyko neighborhood because of the arrival of large numbers of internally displaced students. It is hard to ensure quality education when you have such a large number of students, he said. We need more classroom space, more desks, and more teachers. We have not received any support from the government in this direction.[\[289\]](#)

Tim, who fled his community following an assault by separatist fighters, experienced congestion in his new school, the Government Technical High School, in Buea:

According to an education official in Douala, Cameroon's largest city, located in the Littoral region, which has welcomed thousands of IDPs,[\[291\]](#) the government has taken steps to accommodate displaced students. He said the Minister of Secondary Education empowered Parent Teacher Associations to build more classrooms and claimed that as a result, the problem of the influx has been resolved.[\[292\]](#)

Yet some schools remain over capacity in Douala, and teachers told Human Rights Watch that their institutions have not received any additional school materials from the government. For example, although the class size at the Government Bilingual High School in the Bonaberi neighborhood increased from an average of 25 to 50 students per class, the government did not supply additional benches, desks, or books.[\[293\]](#)

Private schools have also become congested. A private school teacher in Yaoundé, Cameroon's capital, described how private school enrollment doubled, and even tripled, as a result of internally displaced students from the Anglophone regions. Student numbers at the Bilingual College Paul Messi and the Bilingual College Frantz Fanon each rose from 700 to 1,600-plus, while the Bilingual College Amazia increased from 700 to 2,000-plus. It's not sustainable, he said. Classes are overcrowded, it's difficult to teach. Sometimes we have up to 100 students per class.[\[294\]](#)

There is no doubt that there has been an absence of accountability for attacks on education by armed separatists. As of October 2021, Human Rights Watch is aware of 23 persons who have been arrested following attacks. One armed separatist was arrested and is being prosecuted for his alleged involvement in assaulting and cutting the hand of Clara, a teacher in the South-West region.[\[295\]](#) After the incident in March 2019, Clara said that Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR) soldiers came from their camp near Mamfe, chased the assailants, and caught and detained one of them in Buea. His trial started at the beginning of 2021 and at time of writing is ongoing.[\[296\]](#)

About a week after the release of the kidnapped University of Buea students in March 2019, the military said it arrested at least 10 suspects.[\[297\]](#) Human Rights Watch has been unable to independently verify these arrests or to learn more about the identity or fate of the 10 suspects.

Human Rights Watch is aware of the arrests of 12 more persons, 8 of whom were ultimately convicted of different offences in connection with the school attack in Kumba in October 2020.[\[298\]](#) The 12 were prosecuted before a military tribunal, which on September 7, 2021, following a severely unfair trial, sentenced four to death, fined and jailed another four, and acquitted the final four.[\[299\]](#)

It is likely that there are other cases of arrests and prosecutions of people who were involved in attacks against education. However, Human Rights Watch is not aware of them, including because of the failure of government to respond to its request for this information,[\[300\]](#) the general restrictions imposed by government on information flows, access to the Anglophone regions,[\[301\]](#) as well as the near secrecy surrounding trials of separatist suspects in military courts. Other factors contributing to the low number of arrests and prosecutions of suspected school attackers documented in this report include the governments adoption of a primarily military approach to the crisis.

Since the security and political crisis broke out in the Anglophone regions in late 2016, authorities have systematically tried to control the information flow and hinder access to the North-West and South-West regions to independent national and international monitors and journalists.

In January 2017, the government shut down the internet for three months in the English-speaking regions.[\[302\]](#) According to Internet Sans Frontières, it was the longest shut down by a country in Africa and its impact on the country's economy was devastating.[\[303\]](#) The internet disruptions hampered the ability of journalists and human rights activists to cover and report on events unfolding in the Anglophone regions and hindered peoples access to crucial life-saving information.[\[304\]](#)

At least one journalist has died in military custody following his arrest for covering the crisis. On August 2, 2019, police arrested Samuel Ajiekah Abwue, known as Wazizi, an English-speaking journalist at the privately owned broadcaster, Chillen Muzik and TV (CMTV), and transferred him to a military-run facility in the same city on August 7, where he was then forcibly disappeared.[\[305\]](#) None of his family, friends, colleagues, or lawyers had contact with him after August 7, 2019, but in early June 2020 media reported that they had learned Wazizi died in custody following torture, on an undetermined date. Cameroonian authorities have yet to effectively investigate his enforced disappearance and death in military custody.[\[306\]](#)

Few international journalists have been able to visit the Anglophone regions since 2017, and those who did were either embedded with the Cameroonian army[\[307\]](#) or travelled undercover.[\[308\]](#)

The media accreditation of other journalists who were granted visas to enter Cameroon excluded the Anglophone regions. An international journalist told Human Rights Watch when I obtained my visa and media accreditation in 2019 from the Cameroonian embassy in Paris, I was told that I could not travel to the Anglophone regions.[\[309\]](#) Another journalist said: I got the visa at the Cameroonian embassy in Paris, but I only got the media accreditation in Yaoundé at the communication ministry, five days after my arrival and that accreditation did not cover the Anglophone regions.[\[310\]](#)

At the beginning of the crisis, between late 2016 and early 2017, security forces arrested hundreds of people for taking part in protests,[\[311\]](#) but by the second half of 2017, the governments approach changed. In November 2017, as the number of armed separatist groups grew in the Anglophone regions, President Paul Biya labelled them terrorists and declared war on them.[\[312\]](#) After the so-called Grand National dialogue between September 30 and October 4, 2019,[\[313\]](#) a military solution appears to have largely prevailed.

The deployment of thousands of troops to the English-speaking regions to engage in counter-insurgency operations has led to the killings of hundreds of civilians[\[314\]](#) as well as alleged separatist fighters.

As a Cameroonian lawyer put it:

The insecurity prevailing in the two Anglophone regions appears to have hampered Cameroonian authorities ability to investigate attacks against education and prosecute those responsible. Some courts are not operational or fully operational in both regions. In the two documented cases of prosecution of suspected attackers of schools, the authorities resorted to the use of military courts.

Following the killing of a government schoolteacher by suspected separatist fighters in Kumba, South-West region in July 2021,[\[316\]](#) a Cameroonian lawyer told Human Rights Watch:

Security forces are often abusive toward young men and boys, whom they often treat (with or without cause) as separatists. They continue to instill fear in civilians in the Anglophone regions, especially young men, boys, and their relatives, who worry about being violently targeted by security forces.

A father of two school-age boys from a rural community in the South-West region expressed fear and wariness of the security forces, including in or around schools, because they are known to be abusive:

Some young men also share this sentiment. Jim, kidnapped by armed separatists from his university residence, was relieved that the authorities did not contact him after his release:

A 23-year-old student at the College of Technology of the University of Buea was accused of being a separatist fighter and detained after reporting to gendarmes a generator explosion in Molyko neighborhood in January 2021. He was locked up for one night, but then he secured his release by paying a 150,000CFA (\$270) fine. More should be done to reign in the security forces, he said. Their conduct should improve; they need to respect human rights and respect civilians. They can and should fight the separatists, but they should do it in a legal way.<sup>[320]</sup>

Violence and impunity on both sides has motivated displacement, including abroad. A 28-year-old former student at the University of Buea, South-West region, fled to Cyprus in February 2019 because he feared threats by separatist fighters and abuses by the army:

The first consequence [of these attacks] is that our kids are not going to be educated. Ignorance will be running riot in our community. It would lead to teenage pregnancy, juvenile delinquency, and a culture where people don't valorize education. The worst thing is that it affects future generation of Anglophone Cameroonians. But the bigger picture is that it makes the international community to look at us if we don't really know what we're doing. Why would a people in a liberation movement be preventing kids from going to school? And these same kids are the leaders of tomorrow. And most of these people who are against school education, they have got an education. If you look at the leaders of most of the [separatist] groupings, they studied in this country and they benefited from the education.

Attacks on students, teachers, and schools in the Anglophone regions have had a significant impact on access to education, consequently reducing Anglophone Cameroonians' opportunities for economic and social mobility in the long run. According to a Cameroonian human rights activist:

In addition to directly harming students, teachers, school buildings, and school materials, attacks on education have caused school closures or disruptions, a decline in student attendance and the quality of education, forced displacement of teachers and students, and early pregnancies after students drop out.<sup>[324]</sup> Education professionals and students who survived attacks have also experienced ongoing psychosocial distress and physical problems.

As of February 2021, less than half of primary schools and secondary schools (49 and 42 percent, respectively) in the South-West region were operational, while less than one-third of primary schools and secondary schools (27 percent for both) in the North-West region were operational.<sup>[325]</sup>

In Akeh, the Government High School was a place for students from remote, rural areas to learn. But due to separatists' threats and attacks, the school has been closed since 2018, depriving nearly all 250 students of an education. The school is abandoned and dirty, said a senior official at the school. The bush is taking it over. It's a deplorable situation. The same official noted that in October 2020, a Cameroonian NGO decided to refurbish the school but stopped its work following an attack by armed separatists.<sup>[326]</sup> Photographs and video footage of the abandoned school building taken after the armed separatists' attack show the construction materials left in the classroom.

A teacher at the Government Bilingual High School in Jakiri said that attendance dropped to zero within a year after separatist fighters partially burned his school in mid-2017. The school closed shortly thereafter.<sup>[327]</sup>

On September 6, 2021, schools reopened in Cameroon for the 2021-2022 academic year. However, two out of three schools in the Anglophone regions remained closed, leaving over 700,000 students without education.<sup>[328]</sup> Citing statistics from education authorities, UNOCHA reported that after the first week of schooling, in September 2021, 53 percent of secondary schools, 49 percent of primary schools, and 47 percent of nursery schools were not functional in the South-West region, and only 23 percent of secondary schools were functional in the North-West region.<sup>[329]</sup>

In addition to the challenges posed by attacks on education, the spread of Covid-19 affected school attendance. In 2021, teachers were infected in about 30 percent of the operational schools in the North-West region.<sup>[330]</sup>

The UN Secretary-General estimated in June 2021 that 700,000 school-age children were out of school because of the Anglophone crisis.<sup>[331]</sup> Students have had to drop out due to school closures, fear, and economic reasons related to the crisis. Other students had to stop school for years before eventually resuming their education elsewhere.

Tim stopped his schooling for about three years out of fear. Because his school in Kumbo, North-West region, closed, he enrolled in another school in Buea to pursue his education. Amba boys started threatening all those who used to go to school, and the teachers too and our parents; they repeatedly indicated that anyone seen going to school shall be dealt with bitterly, he said. I was afraid all the time.<sup>[332]</sup>

Linda, a 17-year-old girl who dropped out of school in 2017 due to violence in Mbam, North-West region, said she feels like she is forgetting how to read and write after missing more than four years of education. Because I did not go to school for a long period of time, she said, I now struggle to read and write. It is like I forgot how to do it.<sup>[333]</sup>

To make a living, support their families, or pay fees at new schools, many students, including children,<sup>[334]</sup> found jobs after their schools closed or after they experienced attacks or abuses. According to students, teachers, parents, and social workers in the Anglophone regions, out-of-school students became mechanics, hairdressers, tailors, domestic workers, or construction workers.<sup>[335]</sup> UN agencies, humanitarian organizations, and community leaders have reported that teenage pregnancies have significantly increased because of many girls and young women dropping out of school.<sup>[336]</sup> Teenage pregnancy is both a major obstacle to the educational achievement of female learners and often a consequence of them dropping out.<sup>[337]</sup> Numerous studies have shown that the longer a girl stays in school, the less likely she is to be married as a child and or to become pregnant during her teenage years.<sup>[338]</sup>

Numerous education professionals who experienced or witnessed attacks told Human Rights Watch that they have since struggled with depression, anxiety, fear, trouble sleeping, nightmares, and other emotional difficulties.

Julia, who was attacked by armed separatist fighters in her school in Limbe, eventually felt better but decided to change schools: After the attack, for days, I felt sad, scared, traumatized. I could not sleep. I was afraid of my shadow. I refused to listen to the words of encouragement by my family and friends, I just felt so empty. I truly feared for my life.<sup>[339]</sup>

Andrew, who was kidnapped and shot by separatist fighters in the leg, conveyed his hopelessness:

In all cases documented by Human Rights Watch, education professionals who survived attacks did not receive psychosocial support services from the government. In fact, there are not enough government psychosocial support services available to handle this problem.<sup>[341]</sup>

Some teachers told Human Rights Watch that they have experienced anxiety and stress because of their precarious financial situation, which was often worse for private school teachers. Our research found that public school teachers continued to receive their salaries regardless of school closures and were sometimes redeployed, but private school teachers became jobless.

A 57-year-old private school teacher whose home in Mile 40, South-West region, burned during a confrontation between soldiers and separatist fighters in October 2017 struggled for over one year to find another teaching job:

Since 2017, thousands of students in Cameroon's Anglophone regions have experienced attacks on education. According to parents, teachers, and experts, these experiences have had serious long-term emotional and educational consequences for students, particularly young children.<sup>[343]</sup> A UN official working in Cameroon explained: Children who have experienced violence and witnessed atrocities will have more challenges than others in learning, focusing during classes, completing their homework or exams. They are likely to experience post-traumatic stress.<sup>[344]</sup>

A teacher at the Holy Rosary Integrated Comprehensive College, which suffered two separatists' attacks, witnessed a range of trauma and negative emotions in his students, some of whom were displaced, attacked, threatened, or witnessed abuses:

Maria expressed difficulty concentrating on her schoolwork after her kidnapping experience.<sup>[346]</sup> Tim, who was 17 years old when separatist fighters assaulted him on his way to school, could not stop feeling afraid. The smallest noise would make me panic, he said.<sup>[347]</sup>

A teacher at the Government Bilingual High School in Doualas Bonaberi neighborhood, which has hosted many displaced children from the Anglophone regions, explained other emotional difficulties for displaced students:

He also noted a correlation between students' economic status, performance, and need for psychosocial support. Unfortunately, the lack of psychosocial support services for these students, which the government does not provide, is compounded by cultural norms that stigmatize those with mental health conditions.

According to another teacher: I have students who have experienced violence, displacement, and all sorts of atrocities. They are absent-minded; it's like they cannot forget the pain. Sometimes classmates make fun of them and call them fools. There is little to no understanding of mental [health conditions] in Cameroon.<sup>[349]</sup>

UNICEF has been trying to close the gap in psychosocial support services by training teachers and community leaders on this and related topics and by supporting the creation of child-friendly spaces for recreation and healing.<sup>[350]</sup>

The crisis has disproportionately affected children with disabilities. One teacher described children with disabilities whom she knew:

A former student with an amputated leg described additional barriers to education because of the crisis:

Despite the violence and abuses they experienced or witnessed, many students and teachers demonstrated remarkable resilience.

Veronica said she felt traumatized and shocked but also determined to continue with my university after her kidnapping. In her case, her family was able to pay her school fees and support

her.[\[353\]](#)

Sam, a student who was threatened of harm by separatist fighters on his way back from school in Bamenda in February 2019, now in Yaound, is still pursuing his dream of becoming a doctor:

Nina, a 19-year-old student, managed to change schools and continue her education after Our Lady of Mount Carmel College shut down in October 2017. I don't think I am brave! I just want to pursue my studies despite the threats posed by the separatist fighters, she said.[\[355\]](#)

One government primary school teachers employer relocated her from Muyuka to Tiko, South-West region, after she was repeatedly threatened by separatist fighters. However, she refused to let such intimidation determine her future:

According to the UN, the cycle of violence in Cameroons Anglophone regions has internally displaced nearly 600,000 people since late 2016.[\[357\]](#) Among them are teachers likely thousands and at least 230,246 children who had to flee following attacks on education or against their communities.[\[358\]](#) Displaced teachers and students often struggle to return to school while trying to settle somewhere new. The trauma they endured and the loss of their possessions and livelihoods compound their challenges.[\[359\]](#)

Some of the internally displaced teachers who spoke with Human Rights Watch stopped teaching and took up different work, which was difficult to adjust to. A former teacher, whose husband was killed during a clash between armed separatist fighters and soldiers in Isu, North-West region, in April 2018, fled to Tiko. She has not taught since and instead farms for a living. She said: I miss school, my students, the other teachers. Sometimes, I feel vulnerable, helpless. The experience of being displaced is hard. Integration in Tiko has not been easy adapting to the new context, new people, losing your routine, losing what made you happy.[\[360\]](#)

Due to their age, older teachers had greater difficulty fleeing and living in the bush for weeks to months at a time. In the bush, older people faced higher risks of exposure to diseases without medical care or shelter.

A 60-year-old former teacher said he ran away from Ekona, South-West region, following a violent confrontation between soldiers and separatist fighters in February 2018:

A 63-year-old former primary school teacher fled Defang, South-West region, in late 2019, during a violent confrontation between separatist fighters and soldiers:

Attacks on education led to thousands of families leaving their hometowns and villages to move to safer areas where their children could access school safely. According to a January 2021 World Bank report, a significant number of displacements occurred because of education-related reasons.[\[363\]](#)

A 17-year-old student from the South-West region said: I used to go to school in Tombel, in South-West region. In 2018, my parents decided to send me to study in Douala because the situation was getting bad and there was insecurity and too many threats against students, teachers, attacks on schools by the amba boys.[\[364\]](#)

Other students never went back to school after dropping out. A 24-year-old student who had stopped school in 2017 following the closure of his school fled Sang, North-West region, in March 2019 after soldiers came to his house and shot him in the hand:

Linda, a 17-year-old female student, had difficulties after dropping out from her school in Mbam, North-West region, and beginning work as a nanny in Buea: Buea is not my city. Everything is new here. I have no friends! I just spend my time at home babysitting. I feel all the time some sort of uncertainty. I have no familiarity with this new social environment. I feel unsettled.[\[366\]](#)

Since late 2016, up to 66,000 people from Cameroon have sought asylum in Nigeria.[\[367\]](#) and thousands more have fled to Europe or the US.[\[368\]](#) In August 2019, Human Rights Watch interviewed 56 Anglophone Cameroonian asylum seekers in Cyprus, including 7 former students and 2 former teachers. While asylum seekers felt safer in Cyprus than they did in Cameroon, despite poor living conditions, all interviewees also mentioned feeling isolated and unhappy.

A 27-year-old former University of Buea student fled in July 2019 due to the increasing risks and his inability to go to school:

The right to education, as well as other rights implicated in attacks on education, is enshrined in Cameroonian law as well as binding human rights treaties. Accordingly, the government must refrain from interfering with the enjoyment of these rights and take the necessary steps to protect the population from separatist fighters.

Cameroon has a bijural legal system, in which English common law is applied in the Anglophone regions and French civil law in the Francophone regions.[\[370\]](#) The 1972 Constitution incorporates recognition of obligations to respect the rights to life, humane treatment, freedom of expression, movement, and education, among others.[\[371\]](#) The government has an obligation to take measures to prevent separatist fighters from interfering with the enjoyment of these constitutionally protected rights. Cameroons 1998 and 2001 guidance laws on basic, secondary, and teachers education and on higher education further provide for the right to education and for the protection of both students and teachers in school.[\[372\]](#) The 1998 law also guarantees two separate, parallel Francophone and Anglophone public education systems.[\[373\]](#)

Cameroon is a party to all African and international instruments enshrining the right to education.[\[374\]](#) As a party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), Cameroon is obligated to provide compulsory, free primary education as well as available, accessible, and progressively free secondary education.[\[375\]](#) Human Rights Watch calls on states to take immediate measures to ensure that secondary education is available and accessible to all free of charge. Human Rights Watch also calls on states to make education compulsory through the end of lower secondary school.

Under international human rights law, Cameroon has, as all governments do, an obligation to protect the rights to life, personal liberty, and security of students, teachers, academics, and all education staff.[\[376\]](#) The ICESCR requires that material conditions of teaching staff be continuously improved.[\[377\]](#) As children, students under the age of 18 receive special protections under the CRC and ACRWC, which require the best interests of the child be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities, or legislative bodies.[\[378\]](#) The government is also required to also ensure, to the maximum extent possible, the survival and the development of children.[\[379\]](#) Cameroon is also required to take measures to encourage regular attendance by children at schools and the reduction of child dropout rates.[\[380\]](#)

Cameroon has signed but not ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities which guarantees the right to quality inclusive education and the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in situations of risk.[\[381\]](#) The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has noted that situations of and akin to armed conflict have a disproportionate impact on the right to inclusive education. Temporary learning environments in such contexts must ensure the right of children with disabilities to education on an equal basis with others.[\[382\]](#)

Attacks on schools and education facilities, and more generally, failure to respect the right to education are deemed a serious violation of international human rights law.[\[383\]](#) For example, the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights considered that the closure of universities and schools for two years was a serious or massive violation of article 17 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights the right to education.[\[384\]](#) The scale and longevity of denial of education to students in Cameroon could be considered a gross violation of human rights. In 2005, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law.[\[385\]](#) The Basic Principles provides that victims of gross violations of international human rights law are entitled to a remedy including compensation and reparations, such as for loss of education.[\[386\]](#)

In September 2018, Cameroon endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration, an international political commitment aimed at strengthening the prevention of and responses to attacks on students, teachers, schools, and universities during times of armed conflict.[\[387\]](#) By endorsing the Declaration, Cameroon has committed to using the *Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict*, which urges parties to armed conflicts not to use schools, particularly functioning ones, for any purpose in support of the military effort.[\[388\]](#) These non-binding recommendations remain informative even in crises that do not amount to armed conflicts, such as the crises in Cameroons Anglophone regions.

The Cameroonian government has obligations to investigate and prosecute perpetrators of attacks on students, teachers, and schools as well as to provide assistance and reparations to victims. This should include restoration of access to education where it has been cut off and protected where it exists or when it is re-established. The creation of special task forces to assist in meeting obligations of investigation and prosecution and the establishment of a reparations program, including restoring access to education, could be an effective and practical way forward.

It has become increasingly urgent for the Cameroonian government to take concrete steps to tackle the crisis of education in Cameroons Anglophone regions and address two prongs of the problem the impunity for attacks and the provision of access to safe education. Given both the immediate severity of the impacts on children and the potential long-term consequences, the government of Cameroon should consider establishing two special task forces, with adequate human and financial resources, each to address one of the aspects of the crisis.

The mandate of one task force would be to help reverse the longstanding impunity for attacks against students, teachers, and schools, and to ensure that perpetrators, whether separatist fighters or government actors, are held accountable for their actions. The task force, which should draw on international support as needed, would assess and make recommendations regarding investigations into attacks on students, teachers, and schools and prosecutions of perpetrators. Such a task force would not conduct investigations and prosecutions itself but could provide support and expertise to the judicial authorities.

The special task force should include prosecutors and police with experience in crimes against children (Cameroon has a police unit that specializes on crimes against children: *Police Specialise sur les Crimes contre Mineurs*), as well as independent forensic experts. Experts from the UN and AU should offer to support the task force.

The second special task force should have a mandate to further the re-establishment and protection of access to education for all on an equal basis. It should include experts on childrens rights, womens rights, and disability rights, and draw members from the education ministries, the ministry of justice, and representatives from the National Human Rights Commission, and Cameroonian civil society. UN agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), and the United Nations Childrens Fund (UNICEF) should offer support to the task force. The task force could provide recommendations, with the best interests of the child at the center, on how to tailor effective protective measures for places of education, and options for ensuring access to safe, quality education going forward. It could also advise on the content of a reparations program (see below).

Better information collection and analysis of attacks on education would assist both task forces. Information should be disaggregated by date, location, type of school (educational level, private, public), gender and age of victims and suspected perpetrators, and if the school had been used by armed separatist groups or for military purpose.



Teachers and students who experienced attacks on education, as well as their families, deserve reparations to help remedy the harms they suffered.

The government should establish, through a transparent and participatory process, a credible and inclusive reparations program, with an adequate annual budget and human resources, to support victims of attacks on education and their families.

In addition to the provision of free education for all students as a right, reparations for those affected by attacks could include compensation for loss of materials, and extra support and opportunities, including financial as necessary, to make up for lost education time. The government should also financially compensate teachers who have suffered harm or losses during the exercise of their duties or as a result of being targeted for their profession. To address the physical and emotional trauma of teachers and students, the government should provide adequate free physical rehabilitation and psychosocial support services to victims. This is critical to address the current, massive lack in the provision of such assistance.

The government should promote public awareness of this reparations program, compensation options, and how to access reparations. It should also encourage victims (or their relatives if the victims are children) and education professionals to submit compensation claims.

Cameroon's international partners should publicly and privately press the Cameroonian government to create the special task forces and the reparation programs, leveraging their political and economic relationships as needed.

Cameroon's regional and international partners, such as Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, the US, the UK, the European Commission, UNICEF, UNDP, UNESCO, and the AU should provide financial and expert assistance to any special task forces established and the reparations program to ensure they are adequately resourced and sustainable. Along with civil society organizations, they should supply experts on criminal and reparative justice for attacks on education who would support the mechanisms while developing or improving the Cameroonian staffs skills and expertise.

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[1] For more detailed information on Cameroon's colonial and post-independence history, please see Human Rights Watch, *These Killings Can Be Stopped Government and Separatist Groups Abuses in Cameroon*

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