

Beat: Health

IN CAMEROON GOVERNMENT ALLOW AID ACCESS AMID PANDEMIC COVID-19

8000 CASES CONFIRMED & 10 DEATH

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USPA NEWS - Cameroon's government should ensure that its response to the COVID-19 pandemic respects rights and prioritizes support for those who need it most, including in violence-affected areas. The authorities should allow unhindered access to aid organizations in conflict zones to deliver life-saving assistance. Health officials have confirmed over 800 cases of COVID-19 and 10 deaths as of April 10, 2020, the majority in the cities of Yaoundé and Douala. The actual number of cases is most likely higher since testing is limited. The country has only four testing laboratories, three of them in Yaoundé, the capital. "The COVID-19 pandemic is unfolding at a time of crisis across Cameroon, particularly in the Anglophone regions and in the country's Far North region," said Ilaria Allegrozzi, senior Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. "More needs to be done to ensure that those at greatest risk and those who are fleeing fighting are protected from infection and able to get care if they become sick."

"The COVID-19 pandemic is unfolding at a time of crisis across Cameroon, particularly in the Anglophone regions and in the country's Far North region," said Ilaria Allegrozzi, senior Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. "More needs to be done to ensure that those at greatest risk and those who are fleeing fighting are protected from infection and able to get care if they become sick." In addition to crucial steps to prevent COVID-19, a broader humanitarian response is critical to saving lives in the Far North region, the heart of the Boko Haram insurgency, and in the two Anglophone regions, where armed separatist groups are fighting for independence. Ongoing attacks by Boko Haram and separatists and military operations in these areas have already severely restricted access for aid agencies and their capacity to assess needs and deliver assistance to the people most in need. On April 5, Boko Haram fighters stormed Amchide, Far North region. Three witnesses told Human Rights Watch that two teenage suicide bombers detonated their explosives in the center of the town, killing six men on the spot and injuring 13 others, three of whom later died. Another man was shot in a confrontation between Boko Haram fighters and the military, a resident said. Since late 2013, the Boko Haram conflict in the Far North has caused about 300,000 people to flee their homes and has left 1.9 million in need of assistance.

In the English-speaking regions, violence is also ongoing despite the call for a COVID-19 ceasefire by a separatist group, Southern Cameroons Defence Forces (SOCADef), on March 26. The UN secretary-general's spokesperson welcomed the move, urging other groups "to do the same thing." So far, the group, which operates in Fako and parts of the Lebaleme divisions in the South-West region, is the only separatist group to have stopped fighting because of the pandemic.

At least 15 separatist groups operate in the North-West and South-West regions. In areas of the South-West region and across the North-West region, violence is continuing and military operations are being carried out. On March 31, gendarmes killed four civilian men in the village of Okoyong, Manyu division, South-West region. Four witnesses told Human Rights Watch that gendarmes shot them in front a shop. One witness said: "The gendarmes were looking for Amba boys [armed separatists] but it has been over one year that Amba boys left our village [and] these men were construction workers."

TO PREVENT THE SPREAD OF COVID-19 THE GOVERNMENT HAS SUSPENDED FLIGHTS BY AID GROUPS---

To prevent the spread of COVID-19, the government has suspended flights by aid groups, jeopardizing their operations. The head of an international humanitarian organization based in Cameroon told Human Rights Watch: "Since over three weeks, humanitarian flights have been grounded. UN agencies and non-governmental organizations continue to ask the government to resume them. These flights are key to reach the most vulnerable people living in remote areas. With the virus rapidly spreading, this is exactly the time when the Cameroon's government needs to facilitate our work." In an April 8 news release, the United States Embassy said that Cameroon's government should allow the UN Humanitarian Air Service to resume its flights and allow aid workers and medical supplies "to assist people in need and fight COVID-19."

In the North-West and South-West regions, health facilities have been badly affected by the violence, exacerbating a situation in which the hospitals, like many across the country, lack capacity and equipment. According to the UN children's agency, UNICEF, only 34 percent of health facilities are functional in the Anglophone regions. Since late 2016, many health facilities have been shut down, attacked, or burned. Medical staff has been assaulted, threatened, or forced to flee, depriving people of access to medical care. The Cameroon government has taken steps to contain the spread of COVID-19, including shutting schools and universities, closing borders, banning mass gatherings, encouraging people to follow hygiene rules, and creating a help line. Medical staff, however, have told Human Rights Watch of their concerns that the pandemic is straining the resources of an already fragile health care system. A doctor working in Bamenda, North-West region, told Human Rights Watch: "I worry the spread of the virus in the North-West region might have catastrophic consequences. Hospitals lack basic equipment. There are only three ventilators in the whole region and nearly

no isolation-designated spaces in hospitals.”

Even in major urban centers like Yaoundé and Douala, hospitals are ill-prepared to respond to the pandemic. A doctor in Douala told Human Rights Watch: “There are less than 10 ventilators in the whole city. We are having challenges in treating patients with acute respiratory distress.” Instead of improving its pandemic response, the government seems more concerned with silencing free speech, Human Rights Watch said. On April 3, an opposition party leader, Maurice Kamto, called on Cameroonians to work together in response to government inaction. The police stormed the premises of Equinoxe TV in Douala late that day, threatening to arrest journalists if they aired Kamto’s declaration. Efforts should be focused on critical measures, such as health care and protecting health care workers, not threatening those who question the government’s response, Human Rights Watch said. “Cameroon’s government should accelerate its response to COVID-19, expand access to testing, and make sure those affected by violence, including the displaced, are protected and have access to care,” Allegrozzi said. “If the government doesn’t take preventive steps, shortages of goods, including food and non-food items, water, shelter, and health care could have a devastating impact on people who are already vulnerable.” Source : Human Rights Watch (HRW).

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