

The Dilemma of Civilians Caught in an Armed Conflict

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INTRODUCTION:

What becomes a full blown armed conflict usually begins with a small grievance which is most often neglected by those in position to solve them. The English adage which says "a stitch in time saves nine" is more often than not neglected with grievous consequences. A simple demand that could have been solved with just the click of fingers may become what will plunge the entire country into untold hardship. Once the level of frustration increases and the population becomes engaged in a conflict, it becomes very difficult to control what happens. This is because other sub groups spring up and even if the initial demand is met, it will be insufficient to quell the anger of the already aggrieved population. This is because many opportunist groups spring up with varied demands that make it near impossible for those in authority to address. Peace is priceless. But this is a lesson that is learned a little too late as many people join peaceful or violent demonstration with little or no idea of the consequences of their actions. Many are coerced to believe that the government will bow to pressure and grant their demands. Far from it! What befalls them is senseless loss of lives and property, hunger, poverty, fragmentation of the society, mass exodus of people and total lawlessness.

The sociopolitical crisis rocking the two English speaking regions of Cameroon is what could have been avoided if the adage 'a stitch in time saves nine' was heeded to by the government. It started with lawyers and teachers calling the attention of the government on the indiscriminate use of the French language in courts and the transfer of French speaking teachers to schools in the North West and South West Regions of Cameroon. Cameroon it should be noted is a bilingual country with French and English as the two official languages. Law N° 98 / 004 of 14th April 1998 to lay down guidelines for education in Cameroon prescribes in section 15 (1) that, the educational system shall be organized into two sub systems: the English speaking sub-system and the French speaking sub-systems, thereby reaffirming our national options for biculturalism. Section 15 (2) of same law goes further to say that the aforementioned educational systems shall coexist, each preserving its specific method of evaluation and award of certificates (Tambo, 2003). This explains why teachers of the English sub-system were not happy when French speaking teachers were sent to teach in English speaking schools. For some unexplained reasons the grievances raised by both the lawyers and teachers were ignored and the sociopolitical crisis rocking the two Anglophone regions is proof of that.

Many people get affected in the situation of a full blown conflict. Women and children suffer the most under such circumstances. In the case of the sociopolitical crisis in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon, many women have lost their husbands who were supposed to be the bread winners of the family. Some have seen their homes and businesses being raised down to ashes. The environment has become hostile to live in as there are conflicting orders coming from different directions leaving everyone confused as to which to obey. These have led to many fleeing the troubled regions to find refuge elsewhere with little or nothing left to support themselves.

Consequences of Unplanned Exodus

- **Exposure to diseases due to lack of adequate accommodation, unsafe water and inadequate sanitation facilities:**

Women and girls caught in conflict situation are more exposed to the risk of infection due to lack of toilet facilities and sanitary pads. Many displaced women and girls living in the forests of the south west region of Cameroon now make use of fresh leaves which they harvest from the forest during their menstrual period. Others make use of dry plantain leaves to stop the flow of blood in the absence of sanitary pads. These unorthodox practices have come with a lot of health complications to the ladies concerned.

➤ **Limited health service delivery:**

Living in a refugee camp is challenging, but living under trees in the forests with no health facilities available is life threatening. Many displaced persons fleeing the crisis in the two Anglophone regions of Cameroon have lost their lives because of the absence of basic health facilities where they find themselves. They have died from treatable diseases such as diarrhea, malaria, common cold and even cough. Many pregnant women hiding in the forests have had to go through the entire period of their pregnancy without a single antenatal visit. Some have died in the process of child birth while others have given birth to children having some form of deformities.

➤ **Rape:**

It is rather an unfortunate situation that some men take advantage of conflict situations to inflict pains on vulnerable girls and women. Many girls and women have been raped by men who are supposed to be protecting them. Although some have had the courage to voice it out, many more are dying in silence either because of the shame and disgrace attached to it or for fear of reprisals from their perpetrators.

➤ **Prostitution:**

The crisis has left many women without husbands. Some have either been killed or have been forced to abandon their homes for their own security. The burden of taking care of the family lies heavily on the shoulders of women who find it very difficult because of some prevailing factors. Those who were farmers can no longer go to their farms because they may be caught in cross fire or be raped or even killed. Those who were doing petty businesses could no longer make ends meet because of the numerous ghost towns called in those regions. Girls who were supposed to be in schools studying cannot longer continue due to the inability of their parents to send them to schools out of the troubled regions. Internally displaced women lack the means to look for decent accommodation and the means to adapt in their new environments. These coupled with other unexplained reasons have forced many young girls and women into prostitution. It is not uncommon to see very young girls idling along the streets in the big cities just looking for who can offer them something to eat or where to lay their heads for the night. These come with a lot of consequences.

➤ **Unwanted pregnancies:**

There has been an increased rate in teenage pregnancy following the crisis, especially in the South West region of Cameroon. A report from the Buea health district talked of an unprecedented increase in the number of child mothers who registered for antenatal consultation in the year 2018. It is believed there are many more undocumented cases of teenage pregnancy especially for those who are in the bushes and those who have been internally or externally displaced.

➤ **School dropout:**

The rate of school dropout in the troubled English speaking regions is a call for concern. Nearly all the schools in all the villages in these regions have been forced to close down. There are a few that are still operating in the big downs. The majority of children in the affected villages have not been to school since the month of November 2016. Those who are in the big towns attend school in an epileptic manner due to the numerous ghost towns and lock downs called by different groups. Many parents in the few towns where schools are

operational still keep their children at home because of security concerns. A few who could afford have sent their children out to other safer regions. More than half the population of school going age children now roams the streets during school hours.

➤ **Drug abuse:**

Yes! The crisis has come with an increase in the rate of substance abuse. The cry of most parents now is that of the misuse of a drug called tremadol. School heads and teachers also complain of deviant behaviours from students due to the intake of drugs. There is little wonder why people have resorted to the use of drugs in addressing some the challenges they face as a result of the crisis. Children have seen loved ones been tortured and brutally murdered. They have seen whole villages been reduced to nothing. The sound of many sophisticated weapons is heard on a daily basis. Many more are traumatized with the happenings around them. They think the only way out is to drown themselves in drugs. May God help us!

➤ **Early / forced marriages:**

What can be the fate of young girls whose homes have been destroyed and whose parents don't have the means to sustain them? They are either coerced to marry early or forced by parents to marry early enough so as to help settle their bills.

➤ **Malnutrition:**

Lack or inadequate of intake of food by those fleeing or in conflict zones usually results to malnutrition. Prolonged starvation exposes the individuals to diseases since their immune systems become too weak to fight against infections. In children, malnutrition can lead to stunted growth.

➤ **The Kidnappings:**

The chaos that goes on during situations of crisis results in people taking advantage of the status quo in inflicting pains on others. Helpless girls and women fleeing conflicts have been kidnapped and sold as sex slaves or forced to carry out both domestic chores and sexual roles to warlords. Young boys have been kidnapped and enrolled as child soldiers against their will. Some of them have been forced to perform barbaric acts on their own family members under the influence. Kidnappings for ransom are also on the rise during conflict situations.

A report by UNICEF (2016) indicated that nearly one in four children live in countries affected by conflict or disaster and they are often without access to medical care, quality education, proper nutrition and protection.

Humanitarian Aids: Blessings or Curse?

We have seen and heard of people of good will who come out during crisis situations to alleviate the sufferings of those affected. It should be noted that the majority of persons fleeing from wars and persecutions do so with little or nothing to support them. Their priorities at the time of leaving are to save their lives and those of other family members. What awaits them in their new environment is usually shocking to say the least. They lack food to eat, they lack potable water, they lack toiletries, they lack accommodation and even where to lay their heads at night. There is a lot of desperation and frustration. Under such precarious circumstances, they are at the mercies of whoever is willing to offer any form of help.

While we appreciate the efforts made by the various humanitarian organizations, note should be taken that if their actions are not well coordinated it can lead to a backlash. The main reasons for such efforts should stem from genuine love for one another and due to some political or personal reasons. If our reason is borne by the love for our neighbours as Christ loves us, then we should be orderly as our God is not a God of disorder.

In the course of the crisis rocking Anglophone Cameroon, we have seen refugees fighting with each other in a bid to grab what has been brought to them by some humanitarian organizations. The intentions of the organizations are good. But to watch people who are supposed to be each other's keepers fighting and pushing one another because of uncoordinated relief actions is very disheartening.

We have equally watched items received by refugees been burnt for reasons that are best known to the perpetrators of such acts.

We have equally watched many displaced persons been given items that is not what they are badly need of.

Again we have watched how some aids have been prevented from getting to those badly in need of them.

In all these, those who suffer the most are the very ones who are supposed to be protected. Oh yes! We are talking about the dilemma of civilians caught in armed conflicts.

The Way Forward

Those in decision making positions should be quick to listen to the concerns of the masses and slow to anger. Even if they may not have immediate solutions to the concerns raised by the masses, a kind word spoken at the appropriate time can help to calm down tempers.

The education system should be that which promote in students the ability to ask open questions and take responsibilities in matters of social justice in the society, seek alternative pathways as solutions to developmental problems as well as strife for self employment.

Humanitarian organizations should work in synergy to avoid duplication of tasks and safe resources to care for other needs of those in crisis situation. They should meet the concerned population and carry out a survey on their priority needs before undertaking a visit to those who are internally or externally displaced. The same is true for those in detention centers.

There is need for dialogue with the parties concerned so that help should not be refused to those who are badly in need of them and items given to displaced persons should not be destroyed.

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