



POLICY BRIEF

Cameroon's forceful repatriation of Nigerian refugees

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Since Boko Haram launched its violent campaign in 2009, its reign of terror has spread well beyond Nigeria. It has asserted itself as a regional threat through a growing number of attacks and displaced people throughout the Lake Chad Basin (which comprises parts of Chad, Cameroon, Niger and Nigeria). Boko Haram's incursion into Cameroon has called for the country to respond; however, Cameroon's practice of forcefully deporting Nigerian refugees raises concerns. There are inherent dangers in continuing this practice.

Key points

- ▶ There is a growing international trend of hostilities towards refugees that results in shrinking protection from legal regimes.
- ▶ States violating international human rights laws and placing vulnerable people under imminent threat could lend significant weight to Boko Haram narratives that states are unwilling or unable to protect people.
- ▶ While Cameroon has a legitimate right to regulate who is in the country and fight Boko Haram, equating Nigerian nationals with extremism is distinctly false and distracts from the real issues.
- ▶ Cameroon could set a dangerous precedent and erode the authority of international legal instruments to protect refugees in need.

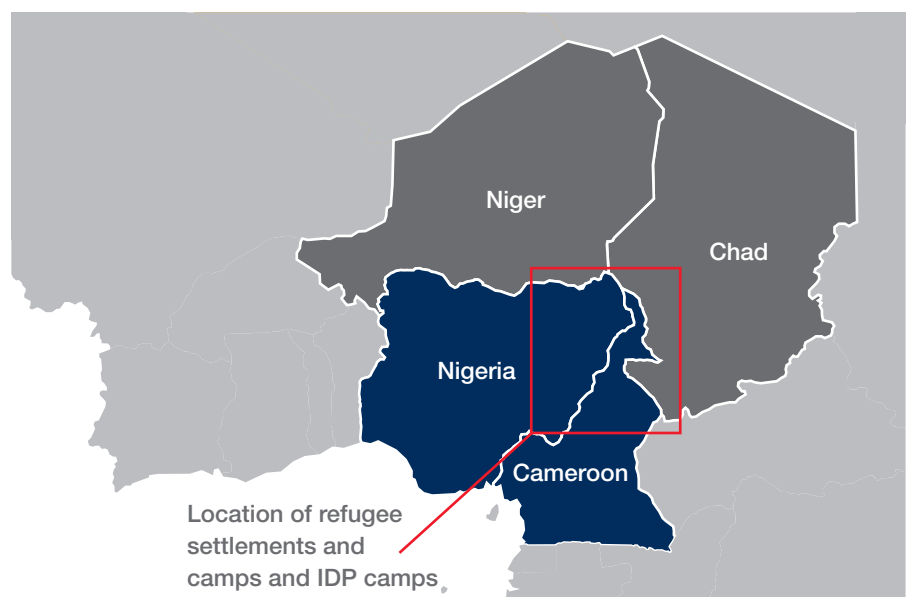
Limitations

This brief should not be read as a comprehensive analysis of Boko Haram behaviour. Summaries of Boko Haram activities are provided using available evidence to establish a trend of increased activity in Cameroon and the Lake Chad Basin. Other Institute for Security Studies (ISS) documents and authors are available for more thorough understanding of Boko Haram or of comprehensive responses to this threat.

The complex crisis affecting the Lake Chad Basin has been labelled ‘the world’s most neglected humanitarian crisis.’¹ The region, which comprises northeast Nigeria, the Far North of Cameroon, southeast Chad and western Niger, is one of the world’s poorest and most fragile. Almost 11 million people are in need, including 7.2 million food-insecure, resulting in an estimated three to four deaths per day. Compounding these issues, massive desertification of the Lake Chad Basin and associated ecosystem damage has resulted in water and food shortages, and created poverty and migration.² The region is entirely aid-dependent, yet grossly underfunded and virtually invisible to world leaders.³ As of August 2017, donors had funded less than 10% of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees’ (UNHCR’s) Cameroonian appeals.⁴

Much of the humanitarian crisis is rooted in the Boko Haram conflict. The extremist group is not only responsible for most of the 2.3 million displaced people but has also contributed to food shortages through attacks on rural communities that have forced farmers to abandon their land, and destroyed economic and food infrastructure.⁵ Military responses have caused further displacement and destruction.⁶ Border closures associated with the conflict have also halted cross-border trade, negatively impacting livelihoods in the border regions and resulting in major inflation.

Figure 1: Context – Humanitarian crisis in the Lake Chad Basin



Source: ISS

Table 1: Humanitarian crisis in the Lake Chad Basin⁷

Indicator	Lake Chad	Cameroon
People in need	10.9 million	1.6 million
Targeted for assistance	8.2 million	767 000
People displaced	2.3 million	217 000 internally displaced people + 89 000 refugees
Food-insecure at crisis level	7.2 million	1.5 million
Children with severe acute malnutrition	515 000	N/A

Boko Haram: a growing regional threat

Over the past five years, Boko Haram has managed to expand its terror campaign beyond Nigeria and established itself as a regional threat. In 2016, for the first time, a slight majority (52%) of incidents occurred outside Nigeria, including 45% in northern Cameroon, up from 21% in 2015.⁸

Most recently, in August and September 2017, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) claimed that the region experienced a sharp increase in Boko Haram attacks, with 30 attacks in August and a record-breaking 44 attacks in September.⁹ According to an ISS database of attacks based on open media reporting, there has been a notable increase in Boko Haram attacks outside of Nigeria in recent years (see Table 2 below).

Table 2: Incidents per country since 2013¹⁰

Country	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017 ¹¹	Grand Total
Cameroon	2	54	82	126	100	364
Chad			25	4	2	31
Niger		1	34	17	8	60
Grand Total	2	55	141	147	110	455

Boko Haram in Cameroon

The Far North province is the poorest region in Cameroon. In addition to major humanitarian concerns, high unemployment and rapid population growth, the region suffers from historic neglect, low state legitimacy and weak national integration.¹² Boko Haram, which has made the region a logistics base, recruitment base, and safe haven for militants, has successfully exploited these gaps along with cultural and religious similarities with northeast Nigeria.¹³

Starting in October 2012, Boko Haram began occasional activities in Cameroon including killing a mayor in the Far North¹⁴ and soon thereafter kidnapping foreigners for ransom. Cameroon responded moderately by beginning to dismantle hidden weapons stockpiles and arresting Boko Haram leaders. Despite Boko Haram's presence in Cameroon, before 2014 the country still viewed Boko Haram as largely a Nigerian problem.¹⁵ It was reluctant to get involved with Nigeria's struggle due to historic tensions,

hesitancy to interfere in another state's affairs and a fear of becoming a target.¹⁶ Motivated by perceived mistreatment of its leaders, Boko Haram moved to direct action and further scaled up its activities. This included kidnapping the deputy prime minister's wife,¹⁷ and holding French and Chinese nationals for ransom.¹⁸ While Boko Haram has not yet established substantial territorial ambition in Cameroon beyond a few border towns, in August 2015 the group moved activities inward from the borderlands and attacked the regional capital, Maroua, some 100 km in from the border.¹⁹

Following the relative success of Cameroon's early response, the country joined the five-country Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) launched in October 2014. The MNJTF includes Cameroon, Niger, Chad, Nigeria and Benin (which joined later).²⁰ In addition to MNJTF activities, and with permission from the Buhari-led government, Cameroon has continued conducting its own military operations in areas along the border – including within Nigerian territory – that are known to host safe havens, training camps, bomb-making factories and militants.²¹ The military interventions by both Cameroon and the MNJTF have been successful in reducing Boko Haram's military capabilities, reclaiming territory, dismantling weapons, arresting Boko Haram leaders and forcing supporters into the mountainous areas near the Cameroonian border and around Lake Chad.

The Minawao camp has capacity for 20 000 but recent reports indicate that close to 60 000 people live there

Boko Haram, however, has proven resilient. It has been able to consolidate some activities in its new, albeit smaller, strongholds in the region and now controls part of the fishing and illicit trafficking markets.²² Following its military losses, the group has altered its strategy from direct confrontation to guerrilla attacks. This accounts in part for the increased number of suicide attacks in Cameroon.²³ It has further established an ability to attract Cameroonian members using a mix of recruitment and coercion, particularly among disaffected youth. The group is exploiting religious and ideological preferences, and offering financial and social incentives. Up to 4 000 Cameroonians are believed to

have joined Boko Haram, with reports that people were given 'bonuses' of up to USD 2 000 and a motorcycle for joining.²⁴

Allegations of human rights abuses, including unlawful detention, torture and even death, have been lodged against the Cameroonian government in its treatment of suspected Boko Haram members, Cameroonians and Nigerians alike.²⁵ Other controversial responses have included widespread bans on veils and motorcycles, border closures, and military and police abuses.²⁶ The conflict has further deepened existing divides between communities in the Far North and the Cameroonians who are actively accusing them of being Boko Haram members and calling for increased military action. The government's harsh handling of the conflict has reinforced the president's popularity in some parts of Cameroon. Politicians within the ruling party have even accused their opponents in the Far North of supporting Boko Haram as a means of destabilising the government, and using anti-terror laws to silence political opponents.²⁷

Cameroon's refugee response

In the Far North, 91% of displacements have been caused by armed conflict. Boko Haram-related violence has displaced around 200 000 Cameroonians internally and led to an influx of some 74 000 Nigerians.²⁸

Prior to 2013, displaced Nigerians were hosted within communities. This changed when the Minawao refugee camp was built in 2013, specifically for Nigerian refugees. The Cameroonian government has said that only Nigerians living in the camp can be recognised as refugees. The camp has capacity for 20 000 but recent reports indicate that close to 60 000 people live there. Proof of nationality and risk of persecution, and the absence of links to any militant groups, provides clearance into the camp.²⁹

Forced returns

According to the UNHCR regional representative in Nigeria, Liz Ahua, the Cameroonian government has claimed that Nigerian refugees constitute a security and economic threat.³⁰ Concerning reports have emerged that the Cameroonian government has been forcefully returning people to Nigeria with the objective of removing them from the country and dissuading further arrivals. A September 2017 report by Human Rights Watch claimed

that over 100 000 Nigerians have been summarily deported, including at least 4 402 documented returns in the first seven months of 2017. Evidence shows soldiers have used physical violence, including beatings with sticks and metal poles, to force people to comply.³¹

There are also allegations that Cameroon is failing to adequately register refugees outside the camps. The UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimate that more refugees – up to 70 000 – live outside the camps than inside, and that they make up the bulk of the 100 000 forced returns. Cameroon only recognises refugees within camps but has simultaneously denied repeated requests from the UNHCR to gain access to Nigerians outside the camps, set up transit centres for new arrivals, or build a second camp. All the UNHCR has received is limited access to some border communities to carry out pre-registration activities.

New Nigerian arrivals are reportedly being ‘aggressively’ screened, accused of being members, or wives of members, of Boko Haram, tortured, and contained in remote locations away from UNHCR access. Cameroon is accused of applying this strategy to avoid complying with international law. Without official recognition, migrants become easier to deport. A Human Rights Watch interview with a senior aid official claimed Cameroonian officials have said ‘Nigeria is rich, has lots of room and should take care of its own people’.³²

Gross abuses have also been reported within the Minawao camps, including a scarcity of food, water and health care

In addition to forced deportations, many more Nigerians have been persuaded to leave ‘voluntarily’ under false pretences, including drastically over-stated conditions in northeast Nigeria.³³ Gross abuses have also been reported within the Minawao camps, including a scarcity of food, water and health care, and restrictions on refugees’ rights to move freely. These are seen as a means of persuading people to leave ‘voluntarily’.

Cameroon has so far denied any forced returns, claiming on 29 March 2017 that the UNHCR’s condemnation was ‘unjust and unacceptable’ and that it ‘threatened to stain Cameroon’s image as a unanimously recognised place that welcomed refugees’.³⁴

Tripartite Agreement

After two years of quiet efforts to curtail forced returns, on 2 March 2017 UNHCR entered into a tripartite agreement, with Nigeria and Cameroon, for the voluntary repatriation of Nigerian refugees living in Cameroon.³⁵ The core of the agreement mandates that refugees return to Nigeria voluntarily, not by force. However, within days of the agreement being formalised, evidence had already emerged that Cameroon was continuing unlawful deportations.³⁶ By the end of March 2017, UNHCR took the decision to publicly criticise

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Cameroon. In May 2017, it published two documents summarising the forced returns of over 90 000 Nigerian refugees from Cameroon since January 2015. In July 2017, the Assistant High Commissioner issued a statement from the Cameroonian country office urging the government to adhere to the agreement, and warning that conditions in northeast Nigeria were unfavourable and UNHCR was not prepared to facilitate safe returns.³⁷

'There is a convention and we in UNHCR will not allow anybody or government to flout the agreement concerning the plights of refugees. Until shelter, health care services, economic recovery, livelihoods, basic services, peace and security are fully restored in affected Nigerian border communities, as enshrined in the tripartite agreement.'
– Liz Ahua, UN representative in Nigeria, June 2017

The resultant Tripartite Commission held its first meeting in August 2017 in Abuja, Nigeria, to develop a work plan and timeline for implementing related activities. The Commission's priorities include establishing a cross-border mechanism to assess return conditions and launching a communication campaign targeted at raising refugee awareness about returns. The Commission is also working on identifying villages in Nigeria that meet conditions for safe return.³⁸

Nigeria's response has been conflicting. Despite routinely overstating security gains and claiming that Boko Haram is defeated, it has repeatedly asked for an end to forced deportations, claiming that conditions are too dangerous for people to safely return and it does not have capacity to adequately respond. Reports have also emerged stating that Nigeria responded to the pressure of forced returns by sending military vehicles to help facilitate deportations, thereby making it complicit in the forced returns.³⁹

Outcomes of forced returns

Returned refugees at risk

Refugees forcefully returned from Cameroon to Nigeria are facing insecurity, displacement and destitution.⁴⁰ Almost 8.5 million people in northeast Nigeria need life-saving assistance, including 5.25 million food-insecure people. Yet humanitarian access continues to be impeded by ongoing conflict, with at least 700 000 people being completely inaccessible to humanitarian operations.⁴¹ Some of the returnees, including children, are weakened by malnutrition and lack of medical care, and die during or following deportations.⁴²

Most of the repatriated refugees are not registered in camps. Communities are suffering from severe overcrowding, water scarcity and a scarcity of housing. Attacks on civilian farms in rural areas are further preventing returnees from restarting their lives or gaining independence. As of August 2017, 650 000 internally displaced people (IDPs) were living in camps and 1.1 million were living in other villages and towns. Women are particularly vulnerable and face sexual exploitation, and children are being separated

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from their families.⁴³ Reports have even emerged of Cameroonians being among the deportees.⁴⁴ Those who are registered are often placed in militarised and overcrowded IDP camps.⁴⁵

Additional reports have emerged of insurgents and accomplices being identified among returning refugees from Cameroon. Authorities did, however, concede that some of the Boko Haram participation was forced. This indicates that Boko Haram defectors or escapees who fled to safety in Cameroon are being arrested and held on return.⁴⁶

Most communities, including those that have been 'liberated', experience ongoing conflicts between Boko Haram and the Nigerian military. Boko Haram attack patterns continue despite military losses, and suicide attacks on civilian targets, including IDPs, happen regularly.⁴⁷

Cameroon has hosted hundreds of thousands of refugees from neighbouring states

In January 2017 up to 100 refugees were killed in an errant military airstrike that accidentally struck an IDP camp.⁴⁸ In September 2017 alone, Boko Haram attacks on IDP camps killed at least 18 people.⁴⁹ Some of the 13 000 Nigerians who returned from Cameroon in April and May 2017 were killed in a Boko Haram attack in Banki in September 2017.⁵⁰

Contravention of international law

Cameroon is a State Party to both the 1969 Organisation of African Unity Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa and the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Cameroon has incorporated these prohibitions into its own laws and claims a long history of protecting refugees from conflicts and crises in the region.

Since 1972, Cameroon has hosted hundreds of thousands of refugees from neighbouring states, including Equatorial Guinea, Chad, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic (CAR). The country hosted an average of 50 000 refugees per year until the early 2000s, when conflict erupted in neighbouring CAR and about 230 000 refugees arrived. Cameroon is currently

hosting up to 350 000 refugees and IDPs.⁵¹ As recently as the 2016 United National General Assembly Refugee Summit, President Paul Biya publicly proclaimed Cameroon a safe haven for refugees.⁵²

Non-refoulement is the key principle inherent in protection frameworks, safeguarding victims from being returned to nations where they will face serious threats. This applies to anyone where a true risk exists. African regional refugee law further prohibits returns to situations of generalised violence, such as the one in northeast Nigeria.⁵³ Refusing to acknowledge Nigerian arrivals, blocking access to UNHCR and forcefully returning displaced people are in direct violation of national and international law.

Erosion of frameworks

'The Refugee Convention of 1951 has been overwhelmed by the reality of 2015.' – Michael Ignatieff, 2015

The Cameroonian response fits into an international trend of growing hostilities resulting in shrinking protection from legal regimes.⁵⁴ Other signatories to refugee conventions, including Europe, Australia and America, are actively developing harsh methods to limit refugee arrivals.⁵⁵ Poorer countries, such as Pakistan and Kenya, which host a disproportionate number of refugees, have also recently forcefully returned refugees. As the number of refugees grows to unprecedented levels, the viability of the conventions designed to protect them becomes increasingly fragile.

Niger and Chad host 250 000 and 125 000 displaced people respectively

Returning Nigerian refugees as a security measure is a particularly dangerous precedent in the Lake Chad Basin, where Niger and Chad are subject to similar conditions. Niger and Chad host 250 000 and 125 000 displaced people respectively.⁵⁶ Both have been targeted by Boko Haram and endure similar humanitarian crises, resource shortages and security threats. Niger has already been accused of human rights abuses, including the unlawful detention of up to 1 400 accused Boko Haram militants, including Nigerian refugees.⁵⁷

The Cameroonian practices of refusing to register arrivals and denying UNHCR access call into question the open-door refugee policies of many African

countries. If other countries follow similar patterns, this would worsen an already dire situation. Chronic underfunding of the region further heightens this risk, as it sends the message that donor countries are not concerned or do not want to get involved.

Supports extremist narratives

'A hungry young man is easily susceptible to the manias of religious demagogues like Mohammed Yusuf and Abubakar Shekau.' - Borno Governor, Kashim Shettima

Displacement causes people to lose community connections, which in turn reduces resilience to humanitarian risks and makes people more susceptible to stigmatisation, crime, exploitation and extremism. Cameroon is actively forcing vulnerable people into compromising situations that inherently contain many of the nascent factors of radicalisation in regions where Boko Haram is actively recruiting.

Additionally, one often-ignored aspect of Boko Haram's objectives is its desire to spread its narrative.⁵⁸ Delegitimising governments as ruling entities is a central Boko Haram narrative, as are regular claims of state illegitimacy and inability or unwillingness to protect people. Boko Haram messaging repeatedly calls for the suspension of national constitutions and the democratic process (including in Cameroon, specifically).⁵⁹

Whether intentionally or by default, states that violate international and national human rights laws, and place vulnerable people in imminent threat and poverty, lend significant weight to Boko Haram narratives. Boko Haram has suffered many losses in its history but has proven to be a highly resilient foe.⁶⁰ There is a risk that it will capitalise on these conditions for targeted messaging and recruitment.⁶¹

Similarly, accusations of state torture and detention have specifically provoked reactions from Boko Haram in the past. Ongoing practices of detaining defected Boko Haram accomplices among returnee streams may further provoke Boko Haram.

Conclusion

Cameroon has provided no evidence that Nigerian asylum seekers or refugees have been involved in any attacks in Cameroon.⁶² All the while, Boko Haram activity in the country has increased. While Cameroon has a legitimate right to monitor and regulate who is in the country, and Boko Haram is a very real threat, equating Nigerian nationals with extremism is distinctly false and distracts from the real issues. Evidence has thus far indicated the group has had far more success in recruiting Cameroonian nationals – particularly disaffected youth – than it has in infiltrating Nigerian refugee flows.

Creating effective responses to the Boko Haram threat in Cameroon requires practical, evidence-based responses that address the root causes of violent extremism in a particular local and national context without violating the rights of refugees in need, or exacerbating the nascent conditions that could worsen violent extremism.

To this end, the following recommendations are proposed:

- 1) Cameroon must reconsider its practice of forcefully deporting refugees and comply with international and national law to protect refugee rights. It must consider the precedent-setting and degrading effects on refugee conventions that this practice creates.
- 2) Cameroon should provide strong asylum procedures instead of denying access and protection to asylum seekers. Refugees, by their very definition are people who are fleeing violence or persecution and not perpetrating it. Implementing proper procedures that include security screenings would in fact lend to security objectives all the while protecting refugees in need.
- 3) Cameroon should develop comprehensive countering violent extremism programmes that target the nascent causes of extremism for both refugees and local populations who may be vulnerable to recruitment. These include addressing socioeconomic development, education, human rights, governance and other issues that cause youth to become disaffected in the region.

Notes

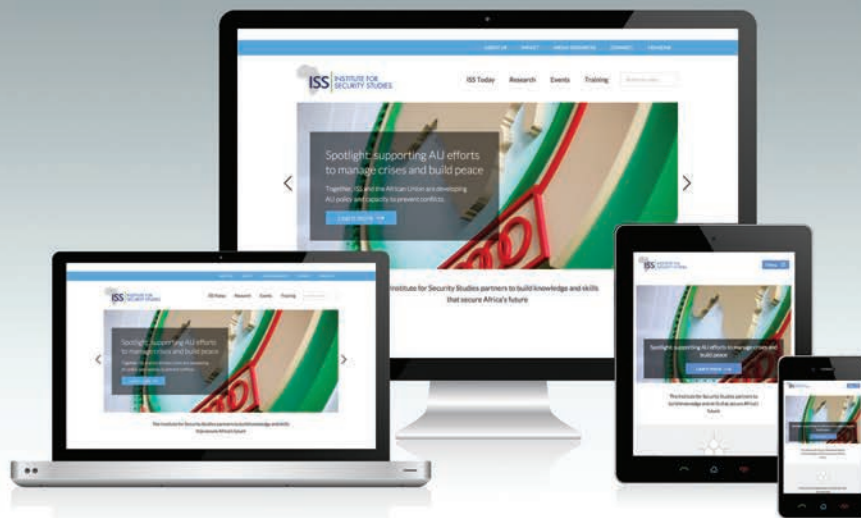
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