



Applying International Humanitarian Law to Cameroon's Anglophone Conflict: Key Challenges and Perspectives

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Research Article

Abstract

This paper explores the legal complexities of applying International Humanitarian Law (IHL) to the ongoing conflict in Anglophone Cameroon. The proliferation of non-state armed groups, their use of guerrilla tactics in the fight for the so-called state of "Ambazonia," and state counter-insurgency operations have made the classification of the conflict difficult, as the line between a Non-International Armed Conflict (NIAC) and internal disturbances has been significantly blurred. This ambiguity has complicated the triggering of IHL treaties like the Geneva Conventions of August 12, 1949. This study employed the qualitative case study design to gather data. Information from interviews with 24 human rights experts and victims of armed violence, direct and indirect observations, reports by human rights groups, and related international legal instruments was integrated. This enabled the researcher to make a comprehensive analysis of the challenges in the application of IHL in the context of the Anglophone conflict in Cameroon. Our findings reveal that ignoring fundamental IHL tenets—specifically distinction and precaution has fostered widespread, indiscriminate targeting of non-combatants and civilian infrastructure. The paper therefore underscores the urgent need to create favorable conditions for the effective application of IHL to the conflict which will go a long way in protecting vulnerable groups and addressing the increasing humanitarian needs arising from it.

Keywords: International humanitarian law, International armed conflict, Non-international armed conflict, Anglophone Conflict, Cameroon.

1. Introduction

As summarized in the preceding abstract, the enforcement of humanitarian protections in Cameroon remains severely compromised. The structural friction between IHL and the Anglophone conflict cannot be understood without examining Cameroon's unique colonial and post-colonial landscape. The Anglophone conflict, which has remained largely under-reported, has become one of the most intractable on the African continent. The inability of the successive Cameroonian governments to effectively and equitably imbibe the English and French legacies inherited by the country at independence into the essential governance structures can largely be blamed for the conflict that has continued to have ravaging effects on civilians and government forces deployed to maintain order in the majority English-speaking North West and South West regions of the country (Michaela, 2022).

The process of the creation of a united modern Cameroon state that had been started by the Germans after the annexation of the territory in 1884 was interrupted following the defeat and ousting of Germany from

Cameroon in 1916 (Ngoh, 1979). The subsequent partition of the territory between Britain and France with the foremost aim of satisfying their colonial interests (Tinoh, 2026) laid the foundations for the linguistic, cultural and administrative differences that were to later drive divisive rhetoric and political violence in Cameroon. The unbalanced nature of the partition that gave France Four-Fifth and Britain One-Fifth of the territory led to majority-minority problems that have remained a significant source of friction in the country (International Crisis Group, 2017).

Following the plebiscite of 11th February 1961 during which the former Southern Cameroons (today the North West and South West regions) voted to reunify with the Republic of Cameroon (former French Cameroon), attempts at integrating the mainly English and French inherited systems in a functional juxtaposition was met with great skepticism and even rejection, especially by the minority English speaking people who feared assimilation (International Crisis Group, 2023). In effect, the abolition of the federal system in 1972 saw many of the structures and institutions that were believed to serve as shields for the protection of the Anglophone identity removed. Instead of the unity it sought to bring, the unitary state rather fueled demands for internal and external self-determination in the majority English-speaking regions of Cameroon.

With these accumulated grievances, it was not therefore surprising that strikes organized by English-speaking lawyers and teachers in 2016 to express their disapproval at the alleged progressive destruction of their legal and educational systems in favor of French ones were soon transformed into a populist movement, as many saw in them an opportunity to call the government's attention to other problems affecting the Anglophone community. This movement, which was primarily organized by professional pressure groups, therefore progressively became a mass movement as other frustrated sectors of the Anglophone society soon joined the protesters (Mbodiam, 2020). The suppression of related strikes in September and October 2017 with a reported degree of brutality by security forces marked a turning point from relatively peaceful demonstrations to violence as armed groups started emerging, carrying out several attacks on security forces (Rogers, 2021).

The resulting armed conflict has adversely affected security forces and civilians who are not or are no longer participating in hostilities and their property in flagrant disregard for Geneva Conventions I, III and IV relative to the amelioration of the conditions of wounded and sick armed forces in the field, the treatment of prisoners of war and the protection of civilian persons in times of war respectively of August 12, 1949 (ICRC, 1949). In effect, disregard for principles such as distinction and precaution that regulate the conduct of armed conflicts has worsened the humanitarian situation and ignited the indignation of national and international human rights organizations that have highlighted the urgent need for the respect of IHL by both sides

However, the question of the implementation of IHL in the context of the Anglophone conflict in Cameroon cannot be comprehensively examined without first determining whether the conflict meets the threshold of an international armed conflict (IAC) or a non-international armed conflict (NIAC).

Against this backdrop the present study is designed to study the following objectives.

- 1) To determine whether the ongoing hostilities meet the legal threshold of an IAC or a NIAC in accordance with the relevant Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols.
- 2) To assess the extent of compliance with IHL by both state defense forces and non-state armed groups in the Northwest and Southwest regions of Cameroon.
- 3) To investigate the impact of the conflict on vulnerable populations and identify patterns of IHL violations, such as extrajudicial killings, torture, and the destruction of civilian property.
- 4) To propose recommendations for strengthening international humanitarian law compliance in the context of the Anglophone conflict in Cameroon.

This paper has several contributions. It addresses the persistent, devastating impact of the Anglophone conflict in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon. It highlights the legal and humanitarian gaps that worsen the suffering of civilians caught in the crossfire between state forces and armed separatist groups.

The study clarifies the distinction between international armed conflicts (IACs) and non-international armed conflicts (NIACs) in relation to the Anglophone conflict, determining exactly how and when IHL applies. It therefore offers a vital legal analysis on whether fragmented separatist factions meet the organization and intensity thresholds required to bind them under Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol II.

It examines the intense difficulty of separating combatants or fighters from civilians in a guerrilla-style insurgency where armed actors live and operate directly within local communities. The study therefore exposes and analyzes violations of core IHL principles such as distinction and precaution, which have led to thousands of deaths, mass displacement, and attacks on civilian objects.

It provides actionable insights into the specific triggers behind humanitarian blockades, mapping how military roadblocks, bureaucratic hurdles, and separatist lockdowns trap civilians. It therefore acts as a scholarly framework for human rights organizations documenting extrajudicial killings and village burnings to hold perpetrators responsible under international criminal law.

The study counters global media neglect by placing Cameroon's Anglophone crisis alongside other heavily critiqued global conflicts, attracting donor funding and providing a roadmap for third-party mediators or state actors looking to build future peace treaties grounded strictly on international norms.

2. Literature Review

Several studies have explored the Anglophone conflict in Cameroon, especially following the transition from non-violence to violence in 2017 and the devastation it has brought on civilian populations and property. This situation is buttressed by Nne-Emeka (2018), who presents reports of the International Crisis Group and Amnesty International on the torture and dehumanization of detainees, with some going as far as leveling accusations of genocide against the regime in Yaoundé. This followed the launching of security operations in the English-speaking regions aimed at quelling separatist guerrilla attacks.

A comprehensive report published by Amnesty International (2018) documented the gruesome situation of civilian populations caught in the cross-fire between government forces and separatist groups in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon. This report exposed massive assaults on teachers and students, ordinary people and even traditional chiefs, especially those who were accused of acting as informants for either side. It revealed that attacks on civilian infrastructure such as schools and homes became a privileged form of reprisal and collective punishment against civilian populations, worsening the humanitarian situation in the majority English-speaking regions of the country.

Complementary to this view, Jean (2020) opines that the conflict in the majority English-speaking regions of Cameroon has had far-reaching socio-political and economic effects on the country, including the massive movement of people to Nigeria as refugees and attacks on rubber and palm plantations that have led to their abandonment. Adopting a similar position, Michaela (2022) reveals the enormous human toll that the conflict has had on the affected regions, with over 6000 recorded deaths following the five years of deadly confrontations between separatist guerrilla fighters and government forces between 2017 and 2022. Focusing on the limited intervention of the international community in addressing the Anglophone conflict in Cameroon, Gbemudia, and Cho (2024) think that despite evidence of the incapacity and unwillingness of the state to protect the population from grave atrocities, the international community has failed to exploit avenues such as the Responsibility to Protect to improve the humanitarian conditions of civilians affected by the ongoing conflict.

OROCK (2021), on his part, examines the role of the Anglophone diaspora in the conflict from a dual perspective. On the one hand, he states that the diaspora has contributed to sustaining the conflict by

garnering support for either internal or external self-determination or by providing funds for separatist operations, especially in the initial years of violence. On the other hand, the Anglophone diaspora has helped in the provision of humanitarian assistance to displaced communities, especially refugees in Nigeria. Writing on the application of IHL in the context of the Anglophone conflict in Cameroon, Mikano and Molua (2025) see it as a set of rules that protect those who are not or no longer actively involved in hostilities and bind all the parties involved in the conflict. Using the intensity and organization criteria, they think that the protracted armed violence between government forces and separatist groups since 2017 amounts to an armed conflict and meets the conditions for the application of IHL.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The qualitative case study research design enabled the researcher to gather relevant information on the challenges in the application of IHL to Cameroon's Anglophone conflict. The approach allowed the author to explore and analyze legal texts and expert opinions within the historical context of the conflict in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon, to provide a comprehensive analysis of the armed conflict and its devastating effects on protected groups in the areas of conflict. The exploitation and analysis of data from interviews, observations, legal texts and secondary sources enabled the researcher to map legal gaps and describe specific compliance challenges that have continuously stood as a hindrance to the effective application of IHL by government forces and separatist fighters.

3.2 Sources of Data Collection

Enriched data that facilitated understanding and analysis of the application of IHL to the Anglophone conflict was obtained through the exploitation of primary sources such as treaties, domestic laws, military manuals, and official government or separatist statements. This enabled the researcher to compare what is written to the situation on the field. Semi-structured interviews with carefully chosen respondents such as human rights lawyers and civil society leaders, internally displaced persons living in the capital city of Yaoundé, traditional and religious authorities, enabled the researcher to explore the perceptions of various stakeholders regarding the factors impeding the effective implementation of IHL in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon.

Useful information for this paper was also obtained through direct and indirect observations of the humanitarian situation in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon since the conflict degenerated into armed violence in 2017. Being a native of the area in conflict, the researcher was fortunate to witness and experience some of the devastating effects of the conflict on close family relations and acquaintances and the hurdles encountered in applying IHL. A close follow-up of news blogs, the mainstream media, and social media platforms on the day-to-day happenings on the ground shaped the researcher's opinion and analysis on the most salient issues surrounding the conflict in the regions.

Secondary sources such as reports from Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the UNO also provided relevant information for this paper. Some of these reports that have documented specific cases of serious human rights violations in the context of the armed conflict in the Anglophone regions facilitated a comprehensive examination of the extent to which IHL has and can be applied in the affected regions.

3.3 Sampling Procedure

24 people were selected based on their mastery of international legal issues or who have been directly or indirectly affected by the Anglophone conflict and interviewed with question guides. Texts from reports of human rights groups extending from 2017 to 2026 were categorized to identify recurring themes of human rights violations either attributed to government forces or separatist fighters in the context of the armed

conflict in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon. Significant legal definitions of important concepts such as IACs and NIACs as they appear in the Geneva Conventions and related international legal instruments were compared with the reality on the ground to determine the applicability of IHL or to identify gaps that continue to impede its application. To ensure accuracy, secondary information was cross-verified with data from interviews, NGO and civil society reports, as well as government statements to ensure accuracy.

4. Results and Discussions

The application of IHL to the Anglophone conflict in Cameroon reveals a complex intersection of legal categorization, operational challenges, and systemic barriers to compliance. This section presents and analyzes findings gathered from interviews, legal texts, and field reports to evaluate how effectively IHL frameworks address the ongoing violence. The discussion is structured around four core axes. First, it examines the qualification of the conflict under Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol II, highlighting the legal ambiguities that hinder formal recognition. Second, it analyzes how the inapplicability of important IHL principles such as distinction and precaution has influenced the conflict. Third, it presents the adverse effects of the conflict on non-combatants and civilian objects. Lastly, the section makes constructive recommendations aimed at strengthening IHL compliance in the context of the conflict in the majority English-speaking regions of Cameroon.

4.1 Analyzing the Anglophone conflict through the lens of an IAC classification

IACs refer to all international conflicts that arise between two or more states (Asia Justice Coalition, 2021). While government troops could clearly be recognized as fighting for the state, the multiplicity of non-state actors either claim to be fighting for an already existing state or one they have continued hoping to create called “Ambazonia”. Consequently, to better analyze IHL within the context of the conflict in the majority English-speaking regions of Cameroon, it is important to determine if the people of the Northwest and Southwest regions constitute a state.

A state generally refers to an organized group of people living on a defined geographical territory, under the political control of an established government exercising sovereignty (PolSci.Institute, 2025). The question of the statehood of the Anglophone regions of Cameroon reveals several complexities which have remained a source of tensions. Cameroon became a German Protectorate on 12 July 1884 after the signing of the Germano-Duala Treaty. Germany administered the territory until 1916, when she was defeated and ousted by the Allied powers (principally comprised of Britain, France and Belgium) at the end of the First World War in Cameroon (Mveng, 1985). The joint Anglo-French administration (also known as the Condominium) that was established was short-lived, which led to the partition of the territory in 1916, with France taking the lion’s share (Abwa, 2010). Britain further partitioned her own portion of Cameroon into British Northern Cameroons and British Southern Cameroons and attached them administratively to their adjacent colony of Nigeria to ease administration.

The political evolution of the British and French-controlled portions of the territory as entirely separate political entities favored separate political destinies, and although many pressure groups and political parties still nurtured hopes for an eventual reunification, the French and British legacies that remained deeply embedded in the administrative life-wire of the two political entities fueled frustrations and, above all, the belief in the right to self-determination either internal or external. This has continued to buttress arguments in favor of the existence of a separate political entity that some have dared to call a state.

In effect, the adoption of Resolution 1352 (XIV) by the UNO framed the plebiscite questions that were to be the basis for the independence of British Southern Cameroons. The questions gave the people the options of gaining independence by either joining the independent federation of Nigeria to which it had been attached and governed since 1916 or joining the independent Republic of Cameroon to which it was attached before the partition (Sobseh & al., 2024). The refusal by the UNO to add the third option of complete

independence that was strongly supported by the Kamerun United Party (KUP) led by P.M. Kale, traditional rulers and a good chunk of the population laid the foundation for frustrations that were to later provoke political tensions and fuel self-determination conflicts in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon after the reunification of the Republic of Cameroon and British Southern Cameroons in 1961 (Sonseh & al.).

Even though British Southern Cameroons was eventually granted “independence” on the 1st of October 1961, it was an “independence” that brought more problems than the freedom traditionally attributed to it. Besides the fact that this “independence” was attached to what many saw as subjection rather than political liberation, it was also a foundation for wrangling between the Cameroon state that used it as a justification for the affirmation of its authority and Anglophone nationalist movements which made claims of the existence of a separate state. Resulting frustrations, accentuated by accusations of the marginalization of the English-speaking minority by the French-speaking majority, further fueled discontent within the populations of the North West and South West regions that was later to degenerate into armed conflict.

Ugwu & Ugwuja (2016) define a state as a group of people who live in a defined territory, under the control of an established government that seeks to ensure that their shared interest is achieved. It is therefore difficult to define an “Anglophone” state within the political cacophony that characterized the period of the independence of British Southern Cameroons. Despite the consensus on the existence of a distinct linguistic identity, the existence of an established authority exercising political authority and sovereignty, which are key attributes of a modern state (Grudi, 2024), remains far-fetched in Anglophone Cameroon.

The intensification of the crisis in the English-speaking regions in 2017 and the intervention of the forces of law and order, who were accused of using force to suppress peaceful demonstrations, created a new momentum that degenerated into armed violence. The resulting persecution of those who had established themselves as leaders of the resistance provoked involuntary exiles and the formation of so-called “Ambazonian” governments in the diaspora (some led by the US-based Samuel Ikome Sako and the UK-based Marianta Njomia). These many governments and the ethnic and ideological divisions even within the populations of the Northwest and Southwest regions only helped to further complicate the consensus that characterizes internationally recognized states.

The eruption of violence between the state armed forces and separatist fighters marked a shift from internal self-determination that was expressed through demands for greater protection of the Anglophone minority within the grand political entity of Cameroon to external self-determination with demands and affirmations of the existence of an independent state. However, the proliferation of separatist leaders, groups, and governments has left behind more confusion than the elements of a modern state. This partly explains the incapacity of these groups to secure international recognition, and with it, sovereignty. From the analysis above, IHL applicable to IACs in the context of the conflict in the English-speaking regions of Cameroon presents several structural challenges.

4.1.1. Determining the legal classification of the Anglophone conflict as a NIAC

NIACs are those that are generally not international in character. The previous absence of laws on them was changed by Common Article 3 and Additional Protocol II, which henceforth provided specific rules for the conduct of hostilities between belligerent factions operating within the territorial confines of a state (ICRC, 2026). These conflicts, which have also come to be known as civil wars, often take the form of armed violence between regular forces of the state fighting against a non-state group, or two or more non-state groups fighting one another (War Watch, 2026).

While the conflict in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon clearly depicts the state forces against numerous non-state groups spread out in the Northwest and Southwest regions, the multiplicity of armed groups and the resulting lack of a coordinated command structure render its classification as a NIAC problematic. In effect, for a conflict to be considered as a NIAC and be distinguished from less severe forms of violence or

internal disturbances, the threshold of a minimum level of intensity of hostilities and organization has to be met (War Watch, 2026).

This intensification of hostilities is signaled by a shift from the use of the regular police forces to the use of military force, an increase in the number of armed confrontations, including their duration and intensity, as well as how widespread the fighting is and the caliber of weapons and equipment used (Dapo, 2012, p.31). While the Anglophone conflict meets some of these requirements, especially in terms of the significant improvement that have been witnessed in their fighting gear recently, a good chunk of armed confrontations which have been on a progressive decline are recorded in some areas of the Northwest region as against the Southwest region that has regained relative stability, with long and intense armed confrontations plummeting drastically (R. Ndah, Personal Communication, June 15, 2026). As such, while some notable confrontations continue to take place in the Bui, Ngoketunjia and Mezam divisions of the Northwest region and the Muyuka area of the Fako division of the Southwest region, violence has reduced to less significant skirmishes in many other parts of the majority English-speaking regions of Cameroon.

Another important requirement for classifying a conflict as a NIAC is how organized the non-state fighting group or groups are. Organization generally entails the existence of a command structure that follows laid down mechanisms and rules of discipline, their capacity to secure a headquarter, training, weapons and other military equipment, the capacity at planning, coordinating and carrying out military operations with a unified military strategy (Dapo, 2012, pp.28-29), and military tactics, and the ability to create a united front that can get into negotiations for the conclusion of cease-fire agreements and peace accords.

Separatist leaders and their fighters in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon have failed to meet the basic requirements of organization. The existence of a multitude of armed groups, with different command structures and objectives, is evidence of the absence of a command structure. In this regard, we have the Ambazonian Defense Forces (ADF), the Tigers of Ambazonia, Vipers, Ambazonian Restoration Army (ARA), Ambaland Forces, and the Southern Cameroon Defense Forces (SOCADEF), and other groups carrying out operations in the regions (Jean, 2020). With separatist leaders spread out in different countries in the diaspora, no one place has been identified as their headquarters, thereby making access to a permanent training ground, weapons, and a unified military strategy difficult. In fact, clashes in decision-making over issues such as the boycott of national day events, disruption of educational activities, and even internal (federalism) and external (independence) self-determination have created a perpetual atmosphere of chaos and confusion that can hardly be reconciled with the kind of organization that should characterize a NIAC.

4.1.2 The Nature of the Anglophone Conflict in Cameroon

Having established that the conflict in the majority English-speaking regions of Cameroon does not clearly meet the threshold of an IAC or a NIAC, it is imperative to examine under what type of conflict it could be classified. Article 1 (2) of Additional Protocol II outlines situations such as internal disturbances and troubles, uprisings, secluded and sporadic acts of violence that do not necessitate the application of IHL. While the Anglophone conflict cannot be clearly categorized as an internal turbulence or a similar act, the evolution of the crisis reveals several complexities that place it at the intersection between an internal violent political tension, guerrilla warfare, and a NIAC.

In effect, the inability of “balkanized” separatist groups to risk prolonged face-to-face confrontations has led to the adoption of the strategy of boycotts and guerrilla tactics that have further complicated the application of IHL. As regards the former, calls have been made for the boycott of schools, national events (such as the Youth Day celebrated every February 11 and National Day on May 20) and Monday “ghost towns” (paralysis of all economic activities every Monday). This has further distanced the conflict from conventional wars that by their nature facilitate the implementation of IHL. As concerns the latter and in line with the strategy of deliberate avoidance of confrontations, fractionized armed groups have organized planned and isolated attacks on the forces of law and order in various parts of the North West and South West regions of Cameroon.

While proponents of this approach have commended its ability at sustaining operations and attacks in the face of an opponent (the state) that is undoubtedly advantaged in terms of human and financial resources, others have been tempted to see some of their actions as acts of terrorism, an appellation that has gained significant approval within government circles (Okereke, 2018) and the “Francophone” population of the country. However, it is important to mention that acts of terrorism which are periodic, isolated and at a low level do not provoke the kind of intensity that will meet the threshold of a NIAC (Saul, 2014).

In effect, frequent attacks on civilian and civilian property that have been blamed on separatist fighters have fostered the conviction among people in and out of the regions that even if the cause at the origin of the conflict was significantly legitimate, the methods used which have principally aimed at coercing the people into aligning with separatist commands and providing part of the funds needed to sustain the conflict cannot be dissociated from similar acts of terrorism in other parts of Africa and the world (TRTAFRIKA, 2026). The state has also been accused of state-sponsored terrorism, especially following its alleged indiscriminate launching of targeted attacks against civilians, as was the case in Ngabaw on February 15, 2024, where about 21 civilians, including women and children, were reportedly killed (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

4.2 How the Inapplicability of IHL has influenced the Anglophone Conflict in Cameroon

The inapplicability of IHL has had serious negative repercussions on the forces of law and order who are not directly participating in hostilities, potential prisoners of war, and civilians that are protected by the Geneva Conventions I, III, and IV of August 12, 1949 (Kevin, 2017). The basic rules that guide hostilities, such as distinction and precaution, which should have limited the adverse effects of the war on vulnerable groups, have been sidelined.

In effect, the forces of law and order and separatist fighters have both been accused of targeting those who are not or are no longer taking part in hostilities in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Considering the asymmetric nature of the conflict and the reduced number of confrontations, separatist fighters have resorted to attacking isolated areas such as security checkpoints, police and gendarmerie posts, and murdering security forces stationed there, irrespective of whether they are actively involved in fighting or not. Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) have also been used to destroy moving vehicles either belonging to military personnel, troops or state civilian administrative officers without establishing their direct link to the conflict. On the other hand, security forces have reportedly targeted civilians and civilian homes in their search for separatist fighters and to avenge the death of their colleagues through summary executions and punitive arson attacks on civilian property (Amnesty International, 2018).

This imbroglio on what should constitute legitimate targets in the conflict in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon can be largely explained by the inapplicability of the principle of distinction, which is the cornerstone of IHL (ICRC, 2023). The principal international legal instrument that consecrates the principle of distinction in IHL is Article 48 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions, which differentiates civilians from combatants in situations of IACs (Marco, 2009). Similarly, Additional Protocol II in its article 13(2) prohibits attacks against civilian populations, individuals and objects (Jean-Marie & al., 2005). The unconventional nature of the conflict has made distinguishing “fighters” from “non-fighters” difficult. This is because even though IHL can appropriately be applied to conventional conflicts, it reveals many limitations in its application to hybrid, asymmetric conflicts that blur the lines between the conventional and unconventional (Marsili, 2020). In effect, Government troops deployed to the affected regions to maintain law and order do not generally constitute a belligerent force involved in confrontations, even if they sometimes carry out operations that lead to clashes with armed separatists. As such, police officers, gendarmes and elements of the armed forces have been killed irrespective of whether they are sick, wounded, unarmed or *hors de combat*.

Similarly, separatist fighters have been accused of hiding within civilian populations, making it problematic for security forces to clearly differentiate them from non-fighters. Since separatist fighters do not always carry arms openly nor wear distinctive uniforms, many civilians have reportedly been mistaken for fighters and killed. The situation is further compounded by the doubtful veracity of intelligence provided since security forces have to depend on civilians for information that could help in identifying separatist fighters and countering their activities. Some have even exploited the situation to settle scores by reporting enemies and even debtors to either security forces or non-state fighters as collaborating with the other side, thereby subjecting even the innocent civilians to violent reprisals (N. Charlotte, Personal Communication, June 20, 2026). As such, alleged informants who have come to be termed “blacklegs” are targeted and killed without prior judgment, and the gruesome images circulated on social media platforms to serve as a deterrent to future supporters (M. Divine, Personal Communication, June 16, 2026).

In addition, there have been few efforts by belligerent factions to distinguish civilian objects from military objectives. While military equipment deployed to the North West and South West regions by virtue of their nature, location, and purpose has been easy to identify and attack by separatist groups, especially with the use of IEDs, even when they are not clearly used for fighting, the identification of civilian objects has been very challenging. This is because many separatist fighters have been accused of inhabiting civilian homes and living amongst civilian populations. This has therefore been used as justification for attacks on this infrastructure, since the alleged actions of the non-state fighting groups who have been accused of attacking security forces from such locations have transformed them into military objectives.

Generally, a keen observer of the war in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon would note that since its intensification, it has been fought with considerable regard to the principle of proportionality. There has been a deliberate limit in the means and methods of warfare, either due to a well-calculated strategy aimed at restoring public order without incidental loss to civilian lives, injury and damage to civilian objects, or due to the unconventional nature of the conflict that makes it impracticable to deploy certain military weapons against essentially “invisible” opponents. The application of the principle of precaution, on the other hand, in the context of the conflict still leaves much to be desired, in spite of the fact that it holds a central place of importance in IHL.

The principle of precaution warrants that parties to an armed conflict take certain precautionary measures before and during military operations to mitigate risks to civilians and civilian objects (Switzerland & ICRC, 2026). This principle, which aims at preventing unnecessary civilian deaths, injuries, or damage to civilian property, has clearly not been achieved in the context of the Anglophone conflict in Cameroon. Occasional attacks on separatist fighters within civilian localities and the targeting of temporary government security installations in the heart of major cities have resulted in many civilian deaths and injuries. Reports on the increasing number of victims of stray bullets from confrontations between the parties to the armed conflict have stood as clear evidence of the difficulties in the implementation of the principle of precaution.

4.3 Impact of the Conflict on Vulnerable Groups Protected by IHL

A vast majority of the victims of conflicts around the world are civilians (Mikano and Molua, 2025). The disregard for IHL by the belligerent factions involved in the Anglophone conflict has therefore adversely affected civilians (Research Guru, 2026). A report by Human Rights Watch (2024) placed the number of internally displaced people from the majority English-speaking regions of Cameroon at over 638,000 people, and 76,499 refugees in Nigeria (Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect, 2026), with not less than 1.7 million in need of humanitarian assistance (Human Rights Watch, 2024). The colossal loss of human lives (estimated at 6,500) since 2016 (Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect, 2026), and untold sufferings of vulnerable populations in the majority English-speaking regions of Cameroon as a result of the ongoing conflict, strongly necessitate a switch to conditions that allow for the application of IHL. The Third and Fourth Geneva Conventions relative to the treatment of prisoners of war and the

protection of civilians in times of war, respectively, of August 12, 1949, make provisions for various forms of protection (ICRC, 1949) that belligerent factions in the Anglophone conflict have failed to uphold.

The third Geneva Convention prohibits the violation of the rights of POWs, including protection from torture, their subjection to medical experiments, violence, invectives, and exposing them to the curiosity of the public. The Convention further restricts information to be provided by POWs to elements such as name, grade, date of birth, and military service number and specifies the need for special treatment for female POWs (ICRC, 1949).

These protections, which would have significantly humanized the war in the English-speaking regions of Cameroon, have given way to the severe violation of the rights of those captured by belligerent factions. In effect, there have been reports of the immediate elimination of fighters or those suspected of participating in hostilities without adequate efforts to establish responsibility for crimes committed before fair and impartial courts (R. Gisèle, Personal Communication, June 17, 2026). This is partly because, contrary to practices in conventional warfare such as ceasefire agreements and the exchange of prisoners of war that create avenues for peace negotiations and addressing humanitarian needs arising from violent conflicts, an unhealthy habit of using casualties as items of propaganda, dissuasion and fear has increasingly defined the actions of the conflicting parties in the regions.

In this regard, the killing and display of the bodies of security forces and non-state actors, sometimes in strategic and populated areas of major cities, have become a strategy that, far from ensuring fairness in war, has rather worsened the cacophony that has characterized the Anglophone conflict in Cameroon. Multiple reports of various human rights violations such as summary executions, indiscriminate arrests and detention, sexual violence, and other acts of a cruel and inhumane nature have influenced calls for the international community to intervene in line with the doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect (Gbemudia, & Cho, 2024). The provisions of the Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the protection of civilian persons in times of war have been some of the most violated in the ongoing conflict in the majority English-speaking regions of Cameroon. Civilians who are not supposed to be subjected to torture, murder, or discrimination due to the color of their skin, place of origin, or political opinion (ICRC, 1949) have suffered the most adverse effects of the Anglophone conflict. Belligerent forces, be they state or non-state, have allegedly carried out indiscriminate killings and torture of civilians, with many of the most gruesome acts captured on video and disseminated on various social media platforms. Various acts of brutality have especially targeted those who have been accused of collaborating with either side of the conflict by providing information against the opposing camp.

Civilians have also been subject to acts of reprisal for actions that were reportedly carried out by members of their families involved in hostilities. Separatist attacks on security forces have reportedly fueled reprisals in the form of the torching of various villages in the affected regions (Amnesty International, 2018). In effect, civilians have been caught in the crossfire as they have been used as leverage for pressuring a conflicting party to make concessions. The imposition of school and Monday boycotts (ghost towns) by separatists has accentuated civilian sufferings and prompted several attacks against those who have been accused of failing to adhere to them, while subjecting those who adhere to penalties and sanctions by the government.

The reported use of child soldiers by separatists, and attacks on health infrastructure in the Bui division by security forces (M. Francis, Personal Communication, June 19, 2026), coupled with brutal attacks on civilian property and accusations of rape by both sides have come to add to massive deaths and displacements both in and out of the country that have significantly worsened the humanitarian situation, emphasizing the dire need for the immediate application of IHL.

4.4 Recommendations for Strengthening International Humanitarian Law

The worsening humanitarian situation in some parts of the North West and South West regions in the context of the Anglophone conflict draws attention to the urgent need to immediately create favorable conditions that would facilitate the application of IHL. In this regard, concrete structural steps are necessary to mitigate the adverse effects of the conflict on the vulnerable groups protected by IHL.

All the actors involved in the conflict, especially government forces and non-state fighters, must sincerely integrate the protection of those who are not taking direct part in hostilities, such as civilians, health workers and educators, into their war strategy. This can be easily achieved by adhering strictly to the rules of armed conflict, which prohibit the targeting of civilians and civilian objects such as homes and schools.

Granting humanitarian access into areas hardly hit by the conflict could also go a long way in reducing unnecessary civilian suffering. Granting independent agencies such as the International Committee of the Red Cross unhindered access to provide food, medical assistance and psychosocial support could help improve the humanitarian conditions of a multitude of those affected by the conflict in the majority English-speaking regions, refugees in Nigeria and internally displaced people living under precarious situations in other parts of the country.

In addition, the persecution of perpetrators of international crimes committed in the context of the Anglophone conflict could serve as a deterrent to further violations of IHL. War crimes by belligerents, such as rape and the use of child soldiers, which have been reported in the conflict, could be investigated by the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court to bring an end to the impunity that has characterized the actions of some of the actors of the conflict.

Further, regulating and discouraging hate speech on social media, which has significantly fueled violence and eroded the protective fabric of IHL, is also of capital importance. The proliferation of Facebook blogs that are sympathetic to either government forces or separatist groups has become channels through which propaganda videos depicting violence, torture, and even maimed bodies are shared. This has encouraged disregard for basic principles of IHL. Social media can therefore be used as a channel to educate leaders of belligerent groups, fighters and their supporters on IHL and the importance of its effective application by all sides irrespective of who is right or wrong.

5. Conclusion

IHL as a special body of rules that regulates the conduct of hostilities during armed conflicts applies depending on their nature - whether they are IACs or NIACs (ICRC, 2004). This helps to define the rules applicable (Nicholas & Alasdair, p.1), those with the legal right to participate in hostilities or refrain from them, the rules governing hostilities, and even the commencement and termination of hostilities. The Anglophone conflict in Cameroon has continued to reveal that the existence of armed confrontations alone between government forces and non-state armed groups does not suffice to ensure an effective application of IHL. This is because its hybrid, asymmetric nature and the multiplicity of essentially “balkanized” and disorganized non-state armed groups have complicated conditions for *Jus in Bello*. The consequences have been adverse, as the failure to apply basic IHL principles such as distinction and precaution has deprived the civilian populations of the regions and those not actively involved in hostilities of the basic protections provided by the Geneva Conventions, its Additional Protocols and related international legal instruments. The resulting impunity has led to massive loss of human lives and ineffable suffering in the regions. There have therefore been growing calls for an immediate recourse to the conditions that would ensure the application of IHL, and with it, accountability and the much-needed humanitarian aid in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon and beyond.

6. Limitations

One of the major limitations to this study was restricted data access and security. This was because field research was heavily restricted in some areas of the North West and South West regions of Cameroon by

ongoing violence, military presence, and administrative bottlenecks. The sensitive nature of the topic also discouraged potential respondents from providing the researcher with useful information that would have undoubtedly improved the quality of the study.

Further, the spread of propaganda by the state and separatist factions has significantly compromised data reliability. Information on civilian and military casualties has been exaggerated on various communication channels, especially social media platforms, to either show strength or attract sympathy. This has rendered the gathering of verified data difficult and limited objective verification. The fear of retaliation and reprisal killings by armed groups has also caused massive underreporting or censored reporting of information on the conflict.

7. Directions for Future Research

An important and overlooked aspect of the Anglophone conflict is the impact of digital and social media on the actors and population. This impact can therefore be investigated to show how online propaganda, hate speech, and digital mobilization by the state and non-state actors actively blur fundamental IHL principles such as distinction.

Researchers could also conduct comparative quantitative and qualitative studies on how insecurity and bureaucratic impediments restrict neutral organizations like the International Committee of the Red Cross and local non-governmental groups from providing the much-needed humanitarian assistance to non-combatants. This could help to throw more light on the factors that have provoked insecurity and violence around health institutions like the Bango Baptist Hospital (BBH) in Kumbo, the headquarters of the Bui division of the North West region of Cameroon.

Further, the role of civilian leaders of armed separatist groups based in the diaspora could be investigated. Some of these leaders have been accused of issuing orders from abroad without a proper grasp of the realities on the ground. This has had adverse effects on the populations of the North West and South West regions. Such research could therefore focus on their legal liability under international criminal law for ordering various violations of IHL.

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