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(National Early Warning Centre of Nigeria)

Early Warning Brief

Post-Election Unrest in Cameroon: Implications, Risks and Options for Nigeria

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President Paul Biya of Cameroon (Source: The Conversation)

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Background

Following the October 12, 2025, presidential election in Cameroon, the Constitutional Council declared the incumbent Paul Biya, 92, victorious with 53–54 percent of the vote. Biya has ruled Cameroon since 1982. The opposition leader Issa Tchiroma Bakary and other challengers have disputed the results and called for mass protests. Demonstrations and violent clashes have occurred in multiple cities; several fatalities have been reported, and security forces have used force to disperse crowds. Internet restrictions and communications blackouts have been reported in some areas. Cameroon has pre-existing security challenges — longstanding Anglophone separatist conflict in the Northwest and Southwest regions, organized criminal activity in the north and Lake Chad basin spillover risks — that raise the probability of localized escalation being absorbed by existing armed groups.

1.1 Overview of Nigeria – Cameroon Relations

Nigeria-Cameroon relations are characterized by a history of border disputes stemming from colonial-era demarcations, most notably the conflict over the Bakassi Peninsula, but also marked by ongoing cooperation in security and economic spheres. While the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling on the Bakassi Peninsula in 2002 was a major turning point that settled the territorial dispute, the relationship is also defined by a shared need to address regional security threats like the Boko Haram insurgency. This has led to an evolution from confrontation to a more functional and cooperative relationship based on mutual interests.

Nigeria and Cameroon have increased collaboration to combat shared security challenges, particularly the Boko Haram insurgency, which necessitates joint efforts in the Lake Chad basin. Cameroon is a member of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), the regional military command deployed under the aegis of the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) and the African Union (AU). It is one of the five member nations, alongside Benin, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria, that cooperate to combat insecurity and terrorism in the Lake Chad Basin. Cameroon’s forces operate in Sector One of the MNJTF, which covers northern Cameroon, with its headquarters in Mora.



The Multinational Joint Task Force is a regional military force originally composed of troops from Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria, headquartered in N'Djamena, Chad. Its primary mission is to combat the Boko Haram insurgency in the Lake Chad Basin by creating a secure environment, reducing violence, and facilitating stabilization and humanitarian operations. The force operates under the political leadership of the African Union (AU) and the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC).

1.2 Cross-Border Conflict and Security Issues

The Anglophone insurgency in Cameroon has directly spilled over into Nigeria, primarily affecting the border region with Cross River State. This has manifested as cross-border raids by Ambazonian separatist fighters, refugee influxes, and increased criminal activity, adding to Nigeria's existing security challenges.

- **Cross-Border Attacks:** Ambazonian militants seeking independence have launched attacks inside Nigerian territory. A notable incident was the December 2023 raid on the border village of Belegete, where two people were killed and 20 were kidnapped.
- **Infiltration of Armed Groups:** Nigeria's armed forces have intensified security at the border, but militants still manage to enter the country through dense forest paths and river crossings.
- **Increasing Criminality:** Insurgent groups engage in illegal activities like drug, arms and human trafficking, expanding their criminal operations across the border into Nigeria. In October 2024, Nigerian pirates with camps near the Cameroon border kidnapped Cameroonian officials for ransom in the Bakassi Peninsula.
- **Disruption of Trade:** The conflict has disrupted economic activity in Cameroon's South-west region, which borders Nigeria. For example, informal trade flows in the region declined by nearly 39 percent in 2024.

1.3 Humanitarian and Social Impact

- **Refugee Crisis:** The violence has displaced hundreds of thousands of Cameroonians, with over 70,000 fleeing to Nigeria for safety. As of June 2025, UNHCR was aiding 119,000 Cameroonian refugees and asylum seekers in Nigeria, adding to Nigeria's existing humanitarian burden.
- **Refugee Settlements:** These refugees are concentrated in areas of Akwa Ibom, Benue, Cross River, and Taraba states, with thousands living in official settlements like Adagom and Ukende, and tens of thousands more in host communities.
- **Strained Resources:** The influx of refugees has strained the capacity of aid agencies and local communities, which already contend with the needs of Nigeria's own large internally displaced population.
- **Exploitation Risks:** The displacement has created vulnerable populations, particularly unaccompanied minors, who are at high risk of being exploited by human traffickers operating in and around refugee settlements.
- **Possible Links between Cameroonian and Nigerian Secessionists:** There is evidence of links between Ambazonian separatists and Nigeria's own secessionist groups, such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), raising concerns about potential collaboration.
- **Diplomatic Efforts:** In response to the growing cross-border threat, Cameroon and Nigeria agreed in June 2024 to settle long-standing border disputes peacefully, with a deadline set for the end of 2025. In September 2025, Anglophone leaders also directly appealed to the Nigerian government for intervention.



Source: International Crisis Group

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Current Situation

Paul Biya has been declared the winner of the 12 October 2025 presidential election. In the initial aftermath of the poll, the main opposition candidate and ex-government spokesman Issa Tchiroma Bakary had declared himself the winner, saying he defeated the 92-year-old Biya, who is seeking to extend his 43 year-rule by seven more years. Tchiroma's declaration was criticized by both the government and Biya's ruling party, with several officials describing it as illegal. Since the declaration of Biya as the victor, Tchiroma and other opposition leaders have rejected the result and mass protests and clashes with security forces have erupted in Douala, Yaoundé, Garoua and other cities. Reports indicate multiple deaths, hundreds arrested, and internet restrictions imposed by the government.



Cameroonian Opposition Leader Issa Tchiroma Bakary (Source: Reuters)

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Key Findings

3.1 Short-term Risk of Large-Scale Civil War inside Cameroon

Widespread urban unrest and repression make prolonged violent instability likely in the near term; however, we assess that a full-scale, nationwide civil war remains less likely in the next 3–6 months unless one or more of the following occur:

- (a) substantial defections within the security services;
- (b) a rapid recomposition of armed opposition coalitions (including Anglophone separatists and newly mobilised urban militias); or
- (c) foreign state support for armed groups. Existing localized insurgencies (notably in Anglophone regions) and humanitarian pressure raise the risk of escalation.

3.2 Risk of Spill-over into Nigeria

We assess that the risk of a spillover into Nigeria of instability in Cameroon is low to moderate in the short term, rising to moderate if unrest persists or intensifies. Primary spillover vectors include refugee flows into Nigerian border states, cross-border criminality and small arms trafficking, and the spread of political contagion in border communities. Direct interstate conflict or large-scale armed incursions into Nigeria are unlikely absent wider regional collapse.

3.3 Impact on Bilateral and Regional Security Cooperation

Cameroonian forces currently serve in the MNJTF and play a critical role in regional efforts to contain the Boko Haram insurgency, preventing the terror group from using the Cameroonian territory as a staging area or launchpad for attacks in Nigeria. A sustained upheaval in Cameroon is likely to provoke a redeployment of military assets away from the MNJTF to inland positions to defend and secure the regime. This would degrade counterinsurgency operations in North-East Nigeria and could potentially open a new front that allows the rump of Jama'at Ahl al-Sunna li al-Da'wa al-Jihad (JAS) to reconstitute itself near the border with Cameroon. The MNJTF is at present still struggling to address the vacuum created by the exit of Niger in March this year. A reduction of Cameroonian commitments to the Force would be a critical setback with adverse implications for Nigeria's North-East theatre.

3.4 Best-Case Mitigation Pathway

Nigeria should lead a coordinated, rapid diplomatic engagement through LCBC, the African Union (AU) and the UN; calibrated, defensive military posture on the border (not offensive operations inside Cameroon); humanitarian preparedness for refugee influx; and in the event of escalation, incrementally intensified targeted non-lethal pressure (sanctions, asset freezes, travel bans) on senior regime figures.

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Key Risk Assessments

- Low to medium risk of widespread sustained insurgency or nationwide civil war absent effective mitigation. While the state retains central control of major security organs, under conditions of repression, fragmented opposition and existing armed groups could coalesce under stress.
- We assess that there is a significant risk of prolonged localized conflict urban such as the Anglophone insurgency and urban riots persisting. This is because the combination of urban protests, internet blackouts and ongoing the Anglophone insurgency make localized violence the most likely near-term outcome.
- The possibility of a cross-border spillover of the unrest into Nigeria in the form of refugee-inflows, crime, and the proliferation of small arms is deemed to be moderate and will likely be humanitarian and criminal rather than military. The highest risk is refugee flows into border states such as Borno, Adamawa and Cross River and increased activity by smugglers and opportunistic armed groups.

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Implications for Nigeria

- **Humanitarian:** Large, irregular refugee flows could stress border states already coping with insecurity and resource constraints. Health, shelter, food and protection needs may rise quickly in localized spillover.
- **Security:** Increased cross-border trafficking of weapons, fighters and illicit funds. Potential exploitation of Nigerian border communities by Cameroonian actors for recruitment, logistics or reprisal attacks.
- **Political and Diplomatic:** Pressure on Nigeria to take a lead role in regional response (both because of geographical proximity and Nigeria's standing in LCBC).

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Recommendations

6.1 Immediate Term Measures

- **Diplomatic leadership via LCBC & AU**
Nigeria should convene an emergency LCBC ministerial/Heads of State meeting to (a) call for de-escalation, (b) demand independent, transparent investigation into election complaints and allegations of rights abuses, and (c) call for immediate protection of civilians and restoration of communications.
- **Engage Regional and Global Mediation Resources**
Seek AU and UN engagement to legitimize regional mediation and to create an agreed process for political transition if needed. Regional, multilateral pressure is more effective and more legitimate than any unilateral action.
- **Maintain Defensive Force Posture**
Order a calibrated, defensive redeployment of Nigerian military and security assets in border states (Adamawa, North, Far North) to harden borders, secure legal crossing points, and deter cross-border armed groups. This should be explicitly defensive, proportionate, and transparent to avoid perceptions of aggression.

- **Pre-position Engineering, Medical and Logistical Units to assist Humanitarian Reception and Border Management (under clear Rules of Engagement and oversight)**
This measure will protect Nigeria's territory and population, demonstrate readiness, and buy time for diplomatic measures.
- **Humanitarian & Civil Protection Preparations**
Mobilise the National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons (NCFRMI), State Emergency teams and partners (IOM, UNHCR, NGOs) to prepare reception sites, health screening and temporary shelter capacity along likely crossing points. Launch contingency planning (involving State Emergency Management Agencies in the states bordering Cameroon - Adamawa, Akwa Ibom, Benue, Borno, Cross River, Taraba, and Yobe) for an influx of between 50,000 and 200,000 refugees as a working scenario. Early humanitarian preparedness will reduce destabilizing secondary impacts on border communities and mitigates humanitarian suffering.
- **Intelligence and Law Enforcement Measures**
Increase human intelligence (HUMINT) and Electronic Intelligence (ELINT) collection focused on cross-border movements, arms trafficking routes, and extremist and separatist actors. Enhance police coordination with NCFRMI, Immigration and other security actors to detect and interdict criminal facilitators. Prioritizing early detection reduces the risk of armed spillover and criminal exploitation.
- **Humanitarian & Civil Protection Preparations**
Mobilise the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), State Emergency teams and partners (IOM, UNHCR, NGOs) to prepare reception sites, health screening and temporary shelter capacity along likely crossing points. Launch contingency planning (involving State Emergency Management Agencies in the states bordering Cameroon - Adamawa, Akwa Ibom, Benue, Borno, Cross River, Taraba, and Yobe) for an influx of between 50,000 and 200,000 refugees as a working scenario. Early humanitarian preparedness will reduce destabilizing secondary impacts on border communities and mitigates humanitarian suffering.
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6.2 Near-Term Measures

- **Support & Seek an AU/UN-mandated Mediation Process**
Nigeria should offer to host or chair an AU/LCBC mediation team with neutral facilitation (e.g., respected elder statespersons). It should also support any process with clear benchmarks: independent inquiry into vote disputes, ceasefire commitments, and a timetable for confidence-building measures. This would create a legitimate pathway for negotiated resolution while avoiding the costs and dangers of forcible regime change.
- **Targeted Non-Kinetic Pressure**
Implement targeted diplomatic measures (travel bans, asset freezes) against senior Cameroonian regime figures credibly linked to repression; coordinate sanction lists with partners (EU, US, AU). Publicly condition Nigeria's bilateral cooperation on respect for human rights and democratic norms. This will engender a degree of pressure on the Biya government while avoiding military escalation and preserves room for negotiated settlement.
- **Border Community Stabilization & Civic Resilience**
Rapid economic and social support programs to border Local Government Areas (food, cash transfers, policing assistance) to prevent criminal exploitation and localized intercommunal tensions especially arising from an anticipated influx of refugees from Cameroon. Authorities should employ civil-military coordination to ensure humanitarian-security separation. This would reduce local grievances that could be exploited by armed actors.

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Contingency Planning (In the Event of Escalation)

- **Peacekeeping and Stabilization Options (under Multilateral Mandate only)**
Prepare contingencies for contributing forces to an AU or UN peacekeeping/stabilization mission only if a credible, internationally mandated operation is authorized and requested by legitimate Cameroonian authorities or transitional arrangements negotiated through AU/UN mechanisms. Avoid unilateral deployment to effect regime change. A Multilateral mandate is essential for legal legitimacy and to limit escalation.
- **Legal and Diplomatic Pathways for a Peaceful Transition**
Work with AU, UN and key international partners to design legal frameworks and sequencing for a peaceful transition if the regime loses effective control or agrees to step aside — e.g., interim unity government, international observers, and time-bound electoral calendar. Nigeria should support such a process diplomatically. Facilitating the Biya regime's departure from power through legal, negotiated transition will reduce violence and preserve regional order and ensure that disruption is reduced to a reasonable minimum.

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Early Warning Indicators to Monitor (Highest Priority)

- **Cohesion and Discipline of Security Forces**
Should credible reports of mutiny, mass desertion or splits within the Gendarmerie, Presidential Guard or elite units emerge, it would signal a sharply increased probability of a regime fracture and wider collapse. On October 31, Cameroon opposition leader Issa Tchiroma Bakary said he had been escorted to a secure location by soldiers loyal to him for his protection, a move that could indicate a cleavage within the army following the disputed election. Tchiroma had been sheltering in his residence in the northern city of Garoua since the October 12 presidential poll in which he claimed victory. Although he did not give the number of soldiers, his assertion that members of the army are loyal to him could indicate an emergent rift within the country's security forces.
- **Realignment of Armed Groups**
Public alliances between Anglophone separatists, urban militias or northern armed actors would indicate an enhanced risk of all-out conflict with regime forces.
- **Cross-border Flows**
A surge of refugee traffic into Adamawa and cross-border migration patterns from Cameroon into Northern Nigeria as well as the presence of armed elements among the throng of refugees.
- **Communications and Logistics**
Continued internet blackouts, targeted infrastructure attacks, or closure of major border crossings.
- **International Community Measures**
Statements by the AU and the UN, suggestions of sanctions, and expressed willingness to support the deployment of a peacekeeping force with pledges of troop contributions —will shape the legal and diplomatic space for action.

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Recommended Messaging (Public & Diplomatic)

- **Public Messaging**

Nigeria calls for restraint, respect for human rights, transparent investigation of electoral complaints, and urgent humanitarian preparations for refugees.

- **Diplomatic Messaging**

Encourage LCBC/AU/UN to lead mediation; promote a roadmap with ceasefire and confidence-building measures; communicate that Nigeria will protect its borders and citizens and support diplomatic efforts to resolve the crisis.

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Conclusion

Nigeria should assume a posture of active regional leadership: immediate defensive readiness on its borders and rapid humanitarian preparedness; mobilise multilateral diplomatic pressure and mediation through LCBC/AU/UN; impose calibrated, targeted non-kinetic pressure on individuals responsible for repression; and prepare contingency plans for multilateral peace-support participation only under legitimate international mandate. The objective should be to prevent a collapse that produces large refugee flows and cross-border insecurity.

