



Cameroon: Confronting Boko Haram

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Headquarters

International Crisis Group

Avenue Louise 149 • 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: +32 2 502 90 38 • Fax: +32 2 502 50 38

brussels@crisisgroup.org

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Executive Summary

For the last two-and-a-half years, Cameroon has confronted the insurgents of the Nigeria-born group Boko Haram. The conflict has already caused 1,500 deaths, and led to 155,000 displaced persons and 73,000 refugees. Although the first attacks occurred in March 2014, the jihadist group's presence in Cameroon's Far North region dates back to at least 2011. It has benefited from a network of local collaborators and has exploited vulnerabilities that the region shares with north-eastern Nigeria. While the first eighteen months of conflict were characterised by conventional warfare, the group has now switched to an asymmetric mode of attack. The Cameroonian government's focus on a military response has been partly successful, but the structural problems that allowed this threat to arise have not been addressed. The fight against Boko Haram requires adapting and improving security structures, and long-term crisis resolution policies that will prevent a revival of this threat in a different form, and stop insecurity in the region reigniting.

The Far North is the poorest of Cameroon's regions and has the lowest school enrolment rate. A combination of weak national integration and historic neglect by the state have for many years contributed to violence and the presence of smugglers in the region, with a proliferation of highway robbers, traffickers and petty criminals. It was vulnerable to this jihadist insurrection due to geographical and cultural overlap with north-eastern Nigeria, the presence of an intolerant version of Islam and the repercussions of the Chadian civil wars.

Boko Haram exploited these vulnerabilities to make the Far North a logistics base, a safe haven and a source of recruitment. The group has particularly gathered support among disaffected youth in districts adjacent to Nigeria through the use of ideological indoctrination, socio-economic incentives and coercion. Cameroonian security forces, starting in 2013, dismantled hidden weapon stockpiles and arrested Boko Haram leaders, pushing the group to threaten and eventually attack Cameroon directly. In the last two-and-a-half years, the Far North region has experienced at least 460 attacks and about 50 suicide bombings.

Cameroon's government was slow to react against the Boko Haram menace, due to historic tensions with Nigeria, an aversion to intervening in what it perceived as its neighbour's internal problem, and a fear of becoming a target. Despite these early lapses, the government was later able to put in place an effective military response. This response disrupted the group and guided the reaction of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), the sub-regional task force with which Cameroon was reluctant to associate at first. Nonetheless, the weak point of the Cameroonian response remains the lack of commitment to development initiatives and the absence of counter-radicalisation and de-radicalisation programs. Indeed, some measures adopted after the Maroua attacks in July 2015, such as the ban on full-face veils, the closing of the border, restrictions on motorcycle taxis, and abuses by the military could radicalise a portion of the population, including women, and have already accentuated socio-economic vulnerabilities for many young people, leading some to join Boko Haram.

Despite the geographical distance, the war against Boko Haram has not only impacted the Far North. The conflict has reinforced President Paul Biya's leadership and boosted the legitimacy of the nation's defence forces with parts of the population.

The war has nonetheless had a negative effect on the country's economy and has created ethnic and social cleavages, as seen in the stigmatisation of the Kanuri people in the Far North, often indiscriminately associated with the jihadist group. More generally, the conflict highlights a deficit of representation, although without fundamentally threatening the legitimacy of the state: the gerontocratic political elite of the Far North is increasingly challenged by a very young population.

The fight against Boko Haram is a test for security cooperation and sub-regional solidarity. The intervention by Chadian armed forces both in Cameroon, and, alongside forces from Niger, in Nigeria has reduced the group's conventional military capacities. Despite some mistrust, the countries in the region have been able to establish the MNJTF and Nigeria finally accepted that Cameroon may intervene on its territory. This new multilateral force has slowed down the frequency of suicide attacks in Cameroon and is currently engaged against a dissident faction of the group in the Lake Chad Basin. However, the MNJTF lacks funding and logistical resources.

In order to consolidate military gains against Boko Haram and bring back lasting peace in the Far North, Cameroon's government must shift from a security-based approach to focus on socio-economic development and countering religious radicalism. Due to heavy losses during confrontations with the Cameroonian army, Boko Haram has concentrated most of its efforts for the last three months in the Cameroonian areas of the Lake Chad Basin (Darak and Hile Alifa), where it controls part of the fishing economy and illicit trafficking and continues to stage suicide attacks. This shift in Boko Haram's centre of gravity calls for a reinforcement of the security package around Lake Chad, as well as measures to counter the group's financing in that area. A long-term solution should see the return of the state, which would build on the role of civil society and the youth, as well as local elites and external partners to rebuild public services in a long-neglected region.

Recommendations

To encourage development in the Far North, combat religious radicalism and reinforce state presence and public services

To the government of Cameroon:

1. Elaborate a development and economic relaunch program in the Far North by, as a priority:
 - a) improving assistance to internally displaced persons and victims of Boko Haram, as well as education opportunities and health infrastructure;
 - b) reopening the Cameroon-Nigeria border for heavy goods vehicles and traders, with security provided by military escorts, restoring and developing the road network and launching high labour-intensity construction projects; and
 - c) ensuring transparency and good governance of projects initiated in the Far North, in partnership with local populations, including youth and representatives of different ethnic communities.
2. To finance this program, allocate to the region a share of the budget of the triennial emergency plan and of the public investment budget, and coordinate with countries of the Lake Chad Basin to ask for support from donors.
3. Create a program of awareness raising against religious radicalism, and a program of de-radicalisation in prisons.
4. Encourage the security services and judiciary to distinguish among members of Boko Haram taking account of the seriousness of their crimes and their level of involvement in the group, understanding that categories can overlap; ensure that suspects and detainees are treated fairly and in accordance with international law; and support the creation of a “restorative justice” program, including a social reintegration component for forced recruits, informants and low-level logisticians not suspected of serious human rights abuses.
5. Arrange an official visit of the president, leaders of the opposition and civil society, to the departments of the Far North targeted by Boko Haram, and organise the next 20 May national parade in Maroua. This visit would be an opportunity to launch a social cohesion and intercommunal reinforcement program to counter the stigmatisation of communities perceived as being Boko Haram sympathisers.

To civil society, elected and traditional chiefs of the Far North:

6. Adopt a collective and inclusive approach to raising awareness on religious radicalism, including by taking into account cultural, gender and social particularities, and emphasising the need for dialogue, tolerance and openness within families and in places such as Quranic schools, mosques, markets and prisons.

To countries of the sub-region:

7. Elaborate a medium-term development strategy for the Lake Chad Basin, coordinated with the Cameroonian development plan for the Far North and ask for support from donors for financing such plans.

To Cameroon's donors:

8. Encourage the government's development projects in the Far North, and coordinated initiatives in the sub-region for the development of the Lake Chad Basin, by guaranteeing 50 per cent financing, assuming suitable guarantees of the proper use of funds.

*To improve the security response to the Boko Haram threat***To the government of Cameroon:**

9. Cut off Boko Haram funding sources while closely monitoring the livestock market in the Far North and economic activity in the Lake Chad region.
10. Block Boko Haram recruitment:
 - a) by improving cooperation between the Cameroonian armed forces and the local population. This can be achieved through civil-military operations and eradicating human rights violations perpetrated by security forces, notably by consistently sanctioning wrongdoers;
 - b) by lifting, on a case by case basis, restrictions which currently affect economic activity such as that on motorbikes; and
 - c) by putting in place a more efficient communication strategy through drawing on and supporting community-based radio stations, through the creation of awareness-raising shows on national channels, aired in local languages in the Far North, and through countering the promotion of violent radicalism on social networks.
11. Adapt security structures to respond to recent changes within Boko Haram, and improve the strategy against suicide attacks via collaboration with the local population and reinforced forward-looking intelligence.
12. Ensure better coordination between the three military operations in the Far North, including through the Multinational Joint Task Force, and reinforce cooperation with Nigeria and the other countries in the Lake Chad Basin.
13. Limit the usage of vigilante groups, and progressively demobilise them if Boko Haram continues to weaken.
14. Plan for the progressive return of better-equipped police and gendarmerie units along Cameroonian borders if Boko Haram continues to weaken.

To Cameroon's donors:

15. Co-finance the preparation of the Multinational Joint Task Force for operations, adding an important component of training on human rights in wartime, while possibly making funding conditional on respect for human rights by armies of the region.

Nairobi/Brussels, 16 November 2016

Cameroon: Confronting Boko Haram

I. Introduction

The security situation in Cameroon has deteriorated since Boko Haram's bloody emergence in 2014.¹ That came as a terrible shock in a country that up to that point had seen itself as a stable state in an unstable sub-region. The Far North – one of Cameroon's ten administrative regions – is the theatre of this conflict that is sub-regional in scale. This report is the latest in a series of Crisis Group publications on the jihadist threat in the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin. It analyses Boko Haram's impact on the Far North, the factors that have facilitated its breakthrough, its recruitment strategies, its alliances and its influence on the country. It also assesses the government's responses and the repercussions of the conflict for the country. The report is based on documentary research and on more than 230 interviews carried out between January and October 2016 in Yaoundé and seventeen locations in the Far North. A Crisis Group analyst also spent time with the Cameroonian defence forces in March 2016 and visited the advanced positions of Operation Alpha and Operation Emergence 4 at the border with Nigeria.²

¹ This report uses the term "Boko Haram" for the sake of clarity and given its widespread usage. The movement's sympathisers regard the phrase as pejorative and tend not to use it. For more information, see Crisis Group Africa Reports N°168, *Northern Nigeria: Background to Conflict*, 20 December 2010 and N°201, *Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency*, 3 April 2014; and Africa Briefing N°120, *Boko Haram on the Back Foot?*, 4 May 2016.

² Hans De Marie Heungoup, "In the Tracks of Boko Haram in Cameroon", crisisgroup.org, 2 September 2016.

II. Far North: History of a Vulnerable Region

Located between north-eastern Nigeria and south-western Chad, the Far North has historically acted as a channel for trade and transit between the three countries. With four million inhabitants spread across its 34,263 square kilometres, this Sahelian region is the most densely populated in Cameroon. In the 1990s, climate change and deep poverty in rural areas – home to 85 per cent of the population – exacerbated the competition for access to natural resources in a region already suffering inter-communal tensions and recurrent episodes of violence. Boko Haram highlighted and accentuated the structural problems.

A. Far North: Between Violence and Smuggling

Ever since Cameroon became independent, the Far North has seen trafficking in weapons, fuel and drugs, and various types of violent banditry. This permanent insecurity follows a long history of looting and warfare in pre-colonial and colonial times across this region, whose effect on relations between communities remains evident. Around the 1980s, communal tensions were compounded by the phenomena of highway robbery, hostage-taking and conflicts over land.

The first post-independence conflicts in the Far North were intercommunal – between the Kotoko and the Choa Arabs, between the Kotoko and the Massa, and between the Massa and the Musgum in Logone and Chari. They were frequently sparked by struggles for access to resources, particularly those between the Kotoko and the Choa Arabs.³ Insecurity in the area reached its highest levels between 1990 and 2010, with an influx of former combatants from the civil wars in Chad and the Central African Republic, who linked up with local bandits to form highway robbery gangs from the East to the Far North. The gendarmerie struggled to cope with this more violent and sophisticated banditry, leading the authorities to create the Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR) in 2001.⁴ Some highway robbers then turned to hostage-taking or joined up with poachers.⁵

The Far North is located at the meeting point of the frontiers with Nigeria and Chad, where there are significant price and currency differences and intense customs activities. It is an area with a long history of trafficking in a wide range of products:

³ Ever since the colonial period, the relationship between the Kotoko and the Choa Arabs has been characterised by periodic bouts of violence and, since 1992, by vigorous political competition for control over land in Logone and Chari – to the advantage of the Choa Arabs because of their greater numbers. Crisis Group interviews, lecturers at Maroua University, sultans of Kousseri and Goulfey, Far North, March 2016. Saïbou Issa, “Arithmétique ethnique et compétition politique entre Kotoko et Arabes Choa ...”, *Africa Spectrum*, vol. 40, no. 2 (2005).

⁴ The BIR is an elite force established in 2001 to fight against highway bandits; it falls under the authority of the presidency. Formed of 1,000 men initially, the BIR has grown to more than 7,000 today, divided into five land battalions, naval (BIR-Delta and BIR-Coast) and airmobile (GIRAM) sections, observation (GOA) and intelligence units and special forces-type units (CAT and GRS). Crisis Group interview, BIR colonel, Maroua, March 2016.

⁵ See Saïbou Issa, *Les coupeurs de route. Histoire du banditisme rural et transfrontalier dans le bassin du lac Tchad* (Paris, 2010); and Christian Seignobos, “Le phénomène Zarguina dans le nord du Cameroun”, *Afrique contemporaine*, no. 239 (2011). Crisis Group interviews, Tcholliré company commander and administrative authorities, Garoua, September 2014. “Au Cameroun, les massacres d’éléphants continuent”, Radio France Internationale (RFI), 13 March 2012.

watered-down fuel (*zoua-zoua*), Tramol, cannabis or Indian hemp (a local drug), arms, medicines, stolen vehicles and spare parts.⁶ Trade routes, some of them long-standing, run alongside smuggling tracks, generating unusually dynamic business flows that extend from legal trade to informal trade in legal goods and the trafficking of illegal products.

The Logone and Chari department sees substantial trafficking in light and small calibre weaponry, supplied from Chad, the Central African Republic, Sudan and Libya. The Far North is both a market and a transit corridor – which explains the large number of weapons in circulation, as evidenced by the seizures made during police searches of Marou’s Dougoi district and Kousseri’s Mawak and Kodogo districts in 2014.⁷ All the region’s departments see trafficking in drugs, medicines, stolen cars and oil. Petrol trading is most significant in communities on the border with Nigeria, where petrol is subsidised. Tramol is often sold from Nigeria into the Far North, while cannabis grown in southern Cameroon is consumed in the Far North and also sold to Nigeria and neighbouring countries.⁸

B. *A Region Vulnerable to Infiltration by Boko Haram*

Cameroon’s Far North is closely related to north-eastern Nigeria in historical, religious, commercial, ethnic, socio-cultural and linguistic terms, sharing the Arab, Kanuri and Mandara vehicular languages. Rather than being separated by a frontier in the traditional sense, the two regions share a border area.⁹ The same ethnic groups – Kanuri, Glavda, Mandara, Choa Arab –, the same families, and sometimes the same villages are spread on both sides. Islamic culture is also a common trait, particularly as many Cameroonians study at Nigerian Quranic schools. Finally, they share a long history, including conquest by Usman Dan Fodio, coming from Sokoto in the 18th century, and important pockets of resistance to this conquest and others.¹⁰ These factors helped Boko Haram extend its reach into Cameroon.

1. Dismal socio-economic indicators and absence of the state

In the Far North, poverty, low school enrolment, social divisions and the weak presence of the state are factors that increase vulnerability. With 74.3 per cent of its population living below the poverty line – compared with a national average of 37.5 per cent – the Far North is Cameroon’s poorest region.¹¹ Vulnerabilities are higher in rural areas, particularly in the localities on the border with Nigeria, with a poverty rate above 80 per cent in Fotokol, Kolofata and Mayo Moskota districts – those that

⁶ Tramol or Tramadol is a powerful analgesic in the form of pills, manufactured legally in India, but sold illegally in Nigeria – where smugglers buy it to supply neighbouring countries. Crisis Group email correspondence, academics in Maroua, July 2016. Cyril Musila, “L’insécurité transfrontalière dans la zone du bassin du lac Tchad”, French Institute of International Relations (IFRI), July 2012.

⁷ Crisis Group interviews, administrative authorities, Maroua and Mokolo, March 2016.

⁸ Crisis Group interviews, customs officers, Yaoundé, April 2016. “Plus de 200 kg de cannabis saisis sur la route de l’Extrême-Nord”, *investiraucameroun.com*, 13 July 2016.

⁹ Kousseri is 1,611km away from Douala and 1,376km away from Yaoundé, but only 245km away from Maiduguri (capital of Borno state).

¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, researchers, Maroua, March 2016. Elridge Mohammadou, *Le Royaume du Wandala ou Mandara* (Tokyo, 1982).

¹¹ “Tendances, profil et déterminants de la pauvreté au Cameroun entre 2001 et 2014”, National Institute of Statistics (INS), December 2015, p. 43.

are most affected by the conflict with Boko Haram.¹² While the net school enrolment rate reached 84.1 per cent in 2014 at the national level, it is only 46 per cent in the Far North – and a mere 20 per cent in the border districts mentioned above.¹³ Moreover, behind these averages lie differences between communities: the Kanuri have a particularly low school enrolment rate.¹⁴

Due to many years of neglect of the Far North, the Cameroonian state is partly responsible for a lack of public investment, industrial development and the poor condition of health infrastructure and road networks.¹⁵ The state only invested in security to contain and then, in the 2000s, suppress the growing phenomenon of highway robbery – yet without destroying the smuggling networks that have benefited from corruption among customs officers and the security forces.¹⁶ Before the 2011 presidential election, local elites handed out identity cards to thousands of residents of frontier localities, irrespective of their nationality, hoping they would vote for the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM); this made it easier for criminals and non-Cameroonian members of Boko Haram to get identity documents.¹⁷

These failings left a section of the local population feeling abandoned. This is not a universally shared perception because, despite the weak presence of the state, the Far North is not under-represented in the government or the senior civil service – thanks to an informal policy of geopolitical balance that provides for appointments

¹² Crisis Group interviews, researchers at Maroua University, administrative authorities, Maroua and Kousseri, March 2016.

¹³ “Annuaire statistique du Cameroun 2015”, INS, p. 78; “Rapport régional de progrès des objectifs du millénaire pour le développement : région de l'Extrême-Nord”, INS, 2010. “Cameroun: examen national 2015 de l'éducation pour tous”, Education pour tous, 2015. The low school enrolment rate in the Far North is not solely the result of government neglect; in some places, parents opt for Quranic schools. The dominant activities being trade, agriculture, fishing and livestock herding, they do not always see the value of a secular education, particularly as the region is barely integrated into central government administrative structures. Crisis Group interviews, delegate for secondary education, Kousseri, 23 March 2016; senior officials originally from the north, Yaoundé, April 2016.

¹⁴ Some members of the elite originally from the north suggest that the Kanuri may marginalise themselves through their continued reliance on Quranic schools and reticence toward secular Western education, whereas attitudes among other communities in the region have evolved. It is difficult to confirm the accuracy of this perception. However, interviewed by Crisis Group about their principal needs, several displaced Kanuri families in Kousseri referred to the school enrolment of their children as their last priority, and some did not see it as useful. Crisis Group interviews, senior officials originally from the Far North and displaced persons, Yaoundé and Kousseri, 2016; mayor of Pette, Maroua, March 2016; and Crisis Group telephone interview, delegate for secondary education in Mayo Tsanaga, May 2016.

¹⁵ Elites from other regions feel that the Far North is not the only region that is neglected and that this is the result not of a deliberate policy of marginalisation, but of a Cameroonian model of governance that does not focus much on peripheral regions. Crisis Group interviews, researchers at Paul Ango Ela Foundation and academics, Yaoundé, January and June 2016.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, administrative authorities, customs officials and General Directorate for External Research (DGRE) officers, Maroua, Mora, Kousseri and Yaoundé, March and April 2016. Several witness accounts stress that customs officers bribe their superiors in Yaoundé to get themselves posted to the Far North. Crisis Group interviews, police officers, customs officials and a former fuel smuggler, Far North, Yaoundé, March and April 2016.

¹⁷ Possession of several national identity cards is fairly commonplace in the Lake Chad region. After arrest, several Nigerian and Chadian members of Boko Haram were found to have Cameroonian identity documents. Crisis Group interviews, police, gendarmes, administrative authorities and inhabitants, Mora and Kousseri, March 2016.

to be distributed among the elites of all ten regions.¹⁸ The vice prime minister, the finance minister and the speaker of the National Assembly come from the Far North. But the elite is getting old: most members of the government from the Far North are aged more than 60, while the median age of the national population is eighteen. There is an overt rift between generations; young people accuse their elders of pocketing the money earmarked for emergency plans for the region.¹⁹

2. A Sufi Islamic tradition under competitive pressure

In the Far North, Boko Haram has been able to take advantage of the presence of a “radical” or “fundamentalist” Islam.²⁰ Muslims and Christians each represent about two fifths of the population, and animists a fifth.²¹ But this overall average conceals areas of Muslim concentration, such as Maroua and the localities neighbouring the Nigerian border such as Fotokol, Amchidé, Kerawa and Ashigashia.²²

Syncretic and derived from Sufism, Islam in Cameroon is generally considered “tolerant”.²³ Even so, fundamentalist strands have sunk local roots since the 1980s. In the Far North, the predominant Tijaniyya (Sufi) brotherhood now faces competition not only from a syncretic version of Sunniism – historically close to the political authorities, seen as moderate and mainly adhering to the Malekite tradition – but also from a radical or fundamentalist version of Sunniism – drawing its inspiration from Wahhabism and Salafism, it is promoted by preachers, spread through CDs

¹⁸ Ten of the 60 members of the government are natives of the Far North; for the regime, the region is a political stronghold where it usually achieves some of its best election results. Crisis Group interviews, academics, senior civil service and security officials originally from the Far North, Yaoundé and Maroua, February-April 2016.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, students and groups of young people, researchers at the Institut supérieur du Sahel and journalists originally from the Far North, Yaoundé and Maroua, February-July 2016.

²⁰ Local researchers and specialists in Islam dispute use of the expression “rigorist Islam”, preferring the alternative “fundamentalist Islam”. Crisis Group interviews, Adamawa (Cameroon) and Far North, 2014-2016. An overwhelming majority of Muslims in the Far North, including fundamentalists, reject Boko Haram – so direct correlations between rigorist Islam (Salafism and Wahhabism) and terrorism are to be avoided. However, Boko Haram’s main leaders claim allegiance to jihadist Salafism and recruit in the places and among the social groups where rigorist Islam predominates. Crisis Group interviews, academics and Islam specialists, Maroua and Kousseri, March 2016. Elodie Apard, “Les mots de Boko Haram : les prêches de Mohammed Yusuf sur le jihad obligatoire”, *Le Monde*, 29 April 2016; Mohammed Yusuf, *Hazihi Aqeedatum wa Minhaju Da’awatuna* (Maiduguri, 2009).

²¹ For lack of official statistics, Crisis Group has based this estimate on cross-referencing responses from a score of interviews with administrative authorities, researchers and journalists in the Far North.

²² Crisis Group interviews, administrative authorities, Far North, March 2016.

²³ Sufism, an esoteric branch of Sunnism, arrived in sub-Saharan Africa in the 13th century and developed through brotherhoods. Some specialists in Islam challenge the supposedly tolerant nature of Sufism, pointing to the jihads led by Sufi leaders in pre-colonial West Africa. But over the past 50 years, no Islamic revival or jihadist movement has been rooted in Sufism and the Sufi movements have become integrated into state institutions – which may explain why they have eschewed violence. Crisis Group interviews, Islam specialists, Ngaoundéré, Garoua and Maroua, September 2014 and March 2016. Donal Cruise O’Brien, “La filière musulmane : confréries soufies et politique en Afrique noire”, *Politique Africaine*, no. 4 (1981), pp. 7-30; Hamadou Adama, *L’Islam au Cameroun : entre tradition et modernité* (Paris, 2004).

and cassettes sold in markets or circulated via Bluetooth, Facebook or WhatsApp.²⁴ Although the radical movements are weak in the Far North, they are pervasive in the frontier localities already mentioned, as well as in Maroua.²⁵

The spread of fundamentalist Islam also owes something to the *Ahali Suna* movement, which in the 2000s embarked on the propagation of a literal interpretation of the Quran in Yaoundé and the Far North.²⁶ Islam from north-eastern Nigeria, which many Cameroonian Muslims view as a nearby “Mecca”, is highly influential in the Far North: the local Tijaniyya remains under the influence of the Sufi brotherhoods in Yola, capital of the Nigerian state of Adamawa, while other branches of Sunnism have an allegiance to the leading *modibo* (*marabouts* – spiritual guides) in Maiduguri.²⁷ The Nigerian *modibo* have always travelled around northern Cameroon and in 2014, their portraits were still on display in rural buses throughout the region.

Old imams are being confronted by some members of the young generation, who have studied in Nigeria, Sudan or the Middle East and have a deeper knowledge of the Quran and the Arabic language. Accusing the old generation of practising an Islam coloured by local traditions and innovations, they lobby to be given positions of responsibility in major mosques.²⁸ These rifts reflect social factors: for many of these young returnees, appointment as imam offers the sole route to a position in society, because the state does not recognise their Islamic diplomas. That causes frustration, pushing them toward the establishment of their own mosques and greater radicalism in their sermons.²⁹

Well before the Boko Haram attacks, the Far North was prey to trafficking and banditry and was thus a security concern for the Cameroonian state. Inter-communal conflicts, often rooted in old ethnic rivalries and pre-colonial struggles, and instability in neighbouring Chad and the Central African Republic, fuelled smuggling

²⁴ See Crisis Group Africa Report N°229, *Cameroon: The Threat of Religious Radicalism*, 3 September 2015. The campaign against Boko Haram has led to a fall in sales in markets, but the contents still circulate widely on the internet. The majority of the imams running WhatsApp and Facebook platforms are supposedly based at Bertoua (east), Maroua and Kousseri. Crisis Group observations, markets in Ngaoundéré, Maroua and Kousseri, September 2014-March 2016; and interviews, Fulani notables from Garoua, Yaoundé, 2016. There are few mosques formally designated as Wahhabist or Salafist in the Far North. However, under the influence of Nigerian preachers and the thousands of Cameroonians who have studied in Egypt, Sudan, Saudi Arabia or Nigeria, a subtle modification of Muslims’ social and religious practices is taking place. Crisis Group interviews, researchers, imams, *lamido* (first rank traditional chief) of Maroua, sultans of Kousseri and Goulfey, March 2016.

²⁵ A preaching ban was imposed in 2012 in Maroua on an imam who was reputedly Wahhabist; Crisis Group met him and concluded that he was in fact a Sunni fundamentalist. Crisis Group interview, Maroua, March 2016. In order of importance, the various branches of Islam present in the Far North are: Sunnism – including Sufi strands such as Tijaniyya –, Salafism, Wahhabism, the Tablighs, the Ikhwan and Shiism. Crisis Group interviews, imams, Maroua, Kousseri, 2016.

²⁶ The short-lived *Ahali Suna* movement was popularised by Nigerian Hausa traders in the Briqueterie district of Yaoundé, in Maroua, Kousseri and the frontier localities of the Far North. Crisis Group interviews, imams and traditional chiefs, Maroua and Kousseri, 2016.

²⁷ The CDs of the Nigerian preachers Sheikh Jaffar Adam and Mohamed Awal Adam Albani, in particular, are sold in the Far North. Crisis Group observations, 2016.

²⁸ Crisis Group interview, *lamido* of Maroua, March 2016.

²⁹ Crisis Group interviews, senior officials originally from Adamaoua, Yaoundé, February 2016; *lamido* of Maroua, imams, young people returned from Sudan and Saudi Arabia, Far North, March 2016.

networks and accentuated this insecurity. Against a background of state neglect, socio-economic vulnerabilities emerged, including acute poverty, low school enrolment rates and social and generational divides. Subsequently, the outbreak of conflict has paralysed the regional economy, creating conditions for Boko Haram's recruitment of thousands of youths.

III. Boko Haram's Infiltration into Far North

A. *Boko Haram Sinks Local Roots*

While Nigerian jihadist groups have been able to exercise some modest influence in the Far North since 2004, Boko Haram only began to establish itself in the region in 2009. Then from 2014 onwards, as the government dismantled its local networks and cells, the jihadist movement staged head-on attacks against Cameroon.

1. 2004-2013: Early traces evolve into an established presence

The first signs of Boko Haram in Cameroon date back at least to 2009.³⁰ Its presence before then remains a subject of debate, mainly suggested by Nigerian sources.³¹ In September 2004, after clashing with the Nigerian police in Bama and Gwoza, several individuals who were later to become members of Boko Haram are believed to have fled and found refuge in the Cameroonian part of the Mandara Mountains, particularly in Gossi and Mayo Moskota.³² According to Nigerian state security services, Boko Haram's interest in Cameroon dates back to 2006. Khaled al-Barnawi – who would later lead the jihadist group Ansaru, born of a split with Boko Haram in 2012 – reportedly recruited Cameroonians to join the Talibans in Nigeria and formed the sect's first logistical network in 2007.³³ In 2009, serious clashes between Boko Haram activists and the Nigerian security forces in Borno state resulted in the death of 800 members of the group, including its founder Mohammed Yusuf; some of those who escaped travelled through the Far North or spent time there.³⁴

During this period, Boko Haram was probably not seeking to proselytise or recruit in the Far North border communities, but mainly to take refuge there. But the Nigerian security services were already insisting that the group was using Cameroon as a rear base and had alerted the country's authorities.³⁵

³⁰ According to a senior Nigerian state security official interviewed by RFI, while under interrogation in 2009 Mohammed Yusuf stated that his weapons came from Chad, Cameroon and Niger. Musa Tanko, who claims to be Boko Haram's spokesperson, said in 2010 that the organisation's priorities were Nigeria, Cameroon and Chad. www.rfi.fr visited on 17 February 2014 (this interview is no longer available on the website). "Le Nord-Cameroun sert-il de base arrière de Boko Haram?", *L'œil du Sahel*, 25 July 2011.

³¹ None of the administrative or security sources contacted by Crisis Group has been in a position to confirm that Boko Haram was present in the Far North prior to 2009, but statements by former members of the group indicate that this was the case. "Motivations and Empty Promises: Voices of Former Boko Haram Combatants and Nigerian Youth", Mercy Corps, April 2016; "Joining and Leaving Boko Haram: Perspectives from Former Members", United States Agency for International Development (USAID), 8 June 2015.

³² Crisis Group Report, *Northern Nigeria: Background to Conflict*, op. cit., p. 40. Crisis Group interviews, vigilante groups, Tourou, October 2016.

³³ Barnawi was arrested in April 2016 by the Nigerian security forces in Kogi state, far from Cameroon. "Le Nord-Cameroun sert-il de base arrière de Boko Haram?", op. cit.; "Nigeria : le chef du groupe islamiste Ansaru arrêté", *Le Monde*, 3 April 2016.

³⁴ The majority reportedly stayed in Amchidé, Fotokol, Mora, Kousseri and Maroua in 2009-2010, while others passed through these towns en route to Chad and Sudan. Crisis Group interviews, security forces and academics, Maroua, Mora, Fotokol, Kousseri, March-May 2016. See Crisis Group Reports, *Cameroon: The Threat of Religious Radicalism*, op. cit.; and *Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II)*, op. cit.

³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, intelligence officers, Yaoundé, April 2016.

The first sermons by imams linked to Boko Haram in mosques in the Far North took place in 2010, while the first known cases of recruitment – by a few local Salafists drawn to the group – were in 2011. Mahamat Abacar Saley, for example, preached in mosques in the Goulfey district and later went on to recruit eight radicalised youths and to become Boko Haram’s “emir” in the Afadé area.³⁶ There is proof that recruiters and logisticians from the group were in Mayo Tsanaga from 2011 onwards.³⁷ Boko Haram’s proselytism initially relied on distributing Mohammed Yusuf’s sermons, on the sermons of local imams sympathetic to the sect and on visits by its preachers to areas along the border.³⁸

Cameroonians who had returned from their studies in Nigeria and Sudan – some of whom had become radicalised while they were abroad – also played a role.³⁹ In Kerawa and Ganse, proselytism was mainly the work of young men returned from Bama in Nigeria who, during teaching sessions, called on their friends to reject Western education, the Constitution and the State.⁴⁰ During the same period, Nigerian preachers linked to Boko Haram were touring the Mayo Sava and Mayo Tsanaga for baptism ceremonies – and some parents entrusted their children to them.⁴¹

In 2012, tens of thousands of Nigerian refugees arrived at Zlevet, Kolofata and Fotokol. Some refugees stayed in Kerawa until 2014, when their attempts to impose their ideas on the population provoked a clash, and arms caches were discovered.⁴² Local sources reported that Boko Haram sympathisers were among them. In Kolofata, some refugees turned out to be recruiters, slipping into discussions among young people and encouraging the most suggestible ones to deepen their Islamic knowledge in Nigeria.⁴³

In 2012, incursions by fighters from Nigeria started and local cells were established in the Far North. Authorities treated the phenomenon as banditry, even though residents of Goulfey and Kousseri had informed them that it was Boko Haram.⁴⁴ It was also in 2012 that the group demanded the shutdown of bars and application of Sharia in leaflets sent to the authorities and distributed to the population in

³⁶ Mahamat Abacar Saley is a Kotoko originally from Goulfey. After his studies in Chad, Sudan and Maiduguri, Nigeria, he returned to the Far North in 2010, and began to preach in mosques in 2011. Crisis Group interviews, sub-prefect, sultan and senior officials originally from Goulfey, Yaoundé and Goulfey, February-March 2016.

³⁷ Crisis Group interviews, administrative authorities, Far North; academics, Maroua, March 2016.

³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, residents and traders, Far North, April 2016; administrative authority, Mokolo, March 2016. Daily intelligence bulletin, 12 November 2011.

³⁹ From 2009 onwards, Boko Haram reportedly recruited students in certain Sudanese Islamic institutes. A Cameroonian who formerly studied in Sudan described having witnessed the radicalisation of Nigerian and Cameroonian friends and the formation of the first cells after Yusuf’s death. Later, some of these young men joined the jihad in Nigeria, while others remained in Sudan as recruiters. Crisis Group interview, Maroua, March 2016.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, vigilante group and inhabitants, Kerawa, April 2016.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interviews, administrative authorities, Maroua and Mokolo, March 2016.

⁴² Crisis Group interviews, district chiefs and vigilante group, Kerawa, April 2016.

⁴³ Crisis Group interviews, security forces and the *lamido* of Kolofata, March-April 2016.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews, administrative authority, local NGOs and inhabitants, Far North, March 2016.

Amchidé, Fotokol and Kousseri, and threatened traders and transport operators with reprisals unless they contributed to the financing of the jihad.⁴⁵

Boko Haram thus established the core of its logistics network in the Far North between 2010 and 2014, relying in particular on former smugglers and traffickers, traders and truckers who were offered large sums of money to act as logisticians or suppliers.⁴⁶ Kousseri, the capital of the Logone and Chari department, was the main logistics hub: logisticians there arranged arms caches, currency exchange, the production of fake identity documents and printing of propaganda material.⁴⁷ Mayo Sava, close to Boko Haram strongholds in Borno, was the main area for recruitment between 2012 and 2014.⁴⁸ Fuel and food were delivered in Mayo Tsanaga and Di-amaré. Boko Haram used the Mandara Mountains as a safe haven and food and fuel supply corridor.⁴⁹

2. 2014-2016: Open conflict

Since March 2014, the Far North has been the theatre of open warfare. In the course of some fifteen battles, Boko Haram has mobilised hundreds of fighters, armoured vehicles and 4WD vehicles equipped with heavy weapons. After a phase of conventional conflict between March 2014 and June 2015, the group focused mainly on planting improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and then suicide attacks – whose frequency reached a peak in early 2016.⁵⁰

Cameroonian soldiers face an enemy who deploys multiple tactics: attacking in numbers that range from about 1,000 to just 10, using a wide range of operating modes and sometimes staging simultaneous attacks on towns in different departments. Since July 2015, the armed group, apparently weakened or having lost its capacity to launch frontal assaults, has combined ambushes and small strikes against army posts, looting raids and reprisals against vigilante groups (*comités de vigilance*) and those who collaborate with the army or the government. It has also multiplied suicide attacks.⁵¹ At first, Boko Haram committed large-scale massacres in communities it viewed as collaborating with the government, avoiding attacks on

⁴⁵ “Fotokol : Boko Haram exige la fermeture des bars et des auberges”, *L’œil du Sahel*, 5 November 2012; “Boko Haram chasse les évangélistes d’Amchidé”, *L’œil du Sahel*, 7 January 2013. Crisis Group interviews, traders and transport operators, Far North, 2016.

⁴⁶ In 2011 and 2012, a number of traders and transport operators were killed in Kousseri after accepting money from Boko Haram without actually delivering supplies to the sect as had been arranged. Crisis Group interviews, traders, transport operators and agents responsible for territorial surveillance, Kousseri, Fotokol, Amchidé, Mora, March-April 2016.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interviews, traditional chiefs, Far North, March 2016.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interviews, traditional chiefs and administrative authorities, Mora, March 2016.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interviews, security forces and administrative authorities, Maroua, Mokolo, Ldamang and Mabass, March 2016.

⁵⁰ Counting all different types of attack, Boko Haram killed 88 people in January 2016, 79 in February, 23 in March, sixteen in April, thirteen in May, 31 in June, eighteen in July and about 30 in August and September.

⁵¹ At least twenty suicide attacks were foiled without causing casualties, sixteen killed only the kamikaze attackers and 52 claimed other lives. Crisis Group estimate on the basis of open sources and interviews with the security forces and administrative authorities. Crisis Group Briefing, *Boko Haram on the Back Foot?*, op. cit.

those where it had a base. But as it suffered setbacks and local populations rallied around the Cameroonian forces, attacks became indiscriminate.⁵²

The first clash dates from 2 March 2014: a Cameroonian soldier and six members of Boko Haram were killed in Wouri-Marou near Fotokol.⁵³ Under pressure from Nigeria and facing incursions along the frontier, Cameroon began to dismantle Boko Haram's arms caches. This led the jihadist movement – which probably had no political agenda or territorial expansion project in Cameroon at first – to harden its position.⁵⁴ Boko Haram then multiplied attacks on border communities, while distributing leaflets calling on the population not to cooperate with the army.⁵⁵ A spectacular attack on the Waza construction camp of the Chinese company Sinohydro in May 2014 finally pushed Cameroon into declaring war on Boko Haram and deploying 700 soldiers from the BIR as reinforcements in the Far North.⁵⁶ In July 2014, the abduction of the deputy prime minister's wife, members of his family and the mayor of the city of Kolofata led to the deployment of a further 3,000 troops.⁵⁷

Since March 2014, the conflict has left at least 125 dead and more than 200 wounded among the security forces and led to at least 1,400 civilian deaths. In the course of more than 100 attacks, Boko Haram is believed to have abducted more than 1,000 people, mainly women and girls: some have been used to stage suicide attacks, while others have been forcibly married to members of the group.⁵⁸ The defence forces claim to have killed about 2,000 presumed members of the group and arrested at least 970.⁵⁹

Communities that neighbour Nigerian towns controlled by Boko Haram and Lake Chad islands have been the most affected by the jihadist group's attacks. Some Nigerian towns controlled by Boko Haram – such as Banki, Dilbe, Bama, Gambaru and Ngoshi – were part of Cameroon in the colonial era and even after independence.⁶⁰ The important trading towns of Amchidé and Fotokol, attacked because their geographical position could confer an operational advantage on Boko Haram, have been

⁵² Crisis Group interviews, academics and journalists in the Far North, 2016.

⁵³ "Fotokol : le film des affrontements entre l'armée et Boko Haram", *L'œil du Sahel*, 7 March 2014.

⁵⁴ Between 2012 and 2015, about twenty Boko Haram arms caches have been discovered in Kousseri, Fotokol, Waza, Amchidé, Goulfey, Blangoua and Makary. They included dozens of AK47 rifles, munitions, grenades, RPG7s and, in one case, anti-aircraft batteries. Crisis Group interviews, security forces and intelligence officers, Far North and Yaoundé, 2015-2016. "Extrême-Nord : un réseau d'approvisionnement de Boko Haram démantelé", *L'œil du Sahel*, 22 October 2012.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, residents of border localities, Far North, April-May 2016.

⁵⁶ "Dix ouvriers chinois enlevés par Boko Haram au nord du Cameroun", *Le Monde*, 19 February 2014. Boko Haram seized 1,500kg of TNT, abducted ten Chinese and killed two BIR soldiers. Crisis Group interview, administrative authority, March 2016.

⁵⁷ Seventeen people were abducted and thirteen killed, including two soldiers. Crisis Group interview, individual close to the vice prime minister, Yaoundé, April 2016.

⁵⁸ In Mayo Moskota district alone, more than 200 people were killed (and 39 schools shut down); in Kolofata district, more than 350 were killed and in Fotokol district, more than 550. Crisis Group estimates based on open sources and interviews.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, defence ministry spokesperson, Yaoundé, June 2016. Based on open sources and government statements, Crisis Group estimates that the Cameroonian army has killed around 2,300 members of Boko Haram. Crisis Group interviews, security forces and prison staff, Yaoundé and Far North, 2016.

⁶⁰ They were separated from Cameroon a year after independence following the 1961 referendum. See Crisis Group Africa Report N°160, *Cameroon: Fragile State?*, 25 May 2010. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Cameroonian security forces and Nigerian researchers, July 2016.

destroyed and emptied of three quarters of their inhabitants – who were killed or displaced.⁶¹ In 2014, Boko Haram was clearly seeking to take control of towns to add them to the caliphate it had proclaimed in Nigeria, and it even raised its flag above Kerawa, Ashigashia and Balochi, although it controlled them for barely a day.⁶²

The attacks have been carried out against areas with majority Muslim populations. Christians – of whom there are many in the Far North – were targeted in 2014 and 2015: during the February 2015 Fotokol massacre, the rebels said they were hunting for Christians, and churches were burnt down in Mayo Sava and Mayo Tsanaga.⁶³ But these cases were few compared with the number of mosques burnt down, and of imams and Muslims killed in the name of the fight against Muslims regarded as unfaithful.

The places targeted have varied with the seasons. During the November-May dry season, the Logone and Chari department – and in particular the Lake Chad islands, Fotokol and Dabanga – has been the main target of attacks, because the rivers dry up during this period, while during the June-October rainy season, Mayo Sava and Mayo Tsanaga have been targeted. The rainy season has also given Boko Haram the opportunity to reinforce its bases and training camps on the border with Logone and Chari and to establish itself in the hard to reach Cameroonian islands of Lake Chad to recruit fighters. Boko Haram has taken advantage of the rise in water levels to traffic arms through the islands of Tchol, Goulfey and Darak or the unidentified seasonally submerged islets.⁶⁴

As far as battles are concerned – major offensives that can last for one or two days, with the aim of capturing a military base or a strategic location –, Boko Haram mobilised 250 to 800 fighters, and sometimes as many as 1,000, the majority Nigerians, but also Cameroonians and Chadians. Some fighters of Maghreb origin were killed during attacks on the BIR garrison in Fotokol and the motorised infantry brigade in Ashigashia.⁶⁵ Battlefield commanders wore bulletproof vests and used walkie-talkie radios. The first wave of attack would be carried out by experienced fighters armed with RPGs, machine guns and AK-47s, using armoured vehicles, 4WD vehicles and pick-ups equipped with machine guns, usually driven by Chadians. They were followed by hundreds of “shouters” – young fighters armed with AK-47s, shouting *Allahu Akbar*, and advancing on motorbikes or on foot.⁶⁶

⁶¹ From 5 until 7 February 2015 in Fotokol, Boko Haram mobilised around 1,000 fighters, of whom 300 were killed. Seven Cameroonian soldiers, seventeen Chadian soldiers and about 400 civilians were killed, including 78 burnt to death in mosques. Crisis Group interviews, Fotokol, April 2016. “In the Tracks of Boko Haram in Cameroon”, op. cit.

⁶² Besides Amchidé and the three towns mentioned above, several communities in Hile Alifa, Darak, Makary and Mayo Moskota districts were controlled for several days by Boko Haram because the security forces were absent or had difficulty in reaching the affected areas. Crisis Group interviews, Far North, 2016.

⁶³ Most cases of arson against churches took place in Amchidé, Gouzda-Vreket and Beljoel. Crisis Group interviews, residents and displaced people, Mokolo, Mora and Kousseri, March 2016.

⁶⁴ Some islets now have nicknames such as Afghanistan, Pakistan or Tora Bora. Crisis Group interviews, elites in Hile Alifa and Makary, March 2016.

⁶⁵ The involvement of Maghrebis as trainers and fighters in Boko Haram is confirmed by former hostages, former members of Boko Haram and BIR soldiers. Crisis Group interviews, BIR officers and former hostages, 2016; and interviews by Crisis Group analyst in a former capacity, members of Boko Haram detained in Maroua, 2014.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Cameroonian soldiers, Tourou, Mabass, Kolofata and Amchidé, 2016.

The army has been routinely targeted by conventional attacks, staged by 50 to 200 insurgents, while attacks on villages have involved as few as five to 50 fighters. Kidnappings have been commonplace. During the 565 Boko Haram incursions into Cameroon between January 2014 and September 2016 (including 464 attacks and abductions identified by Crisis Group), the army was targeted on 71 occasions (43 conventional attacks).⁶⁷

After having suffered defeats, and seeing the need to counter the mobility and capacity of the security forces to react quickly when under attack, Boko Haram began to plant IEDs.⁶⁸ Since October 2014, the army has defused 37 IEDs in the Far North, while 24 have exploded as military vehicles went past and two have killed civilians.⁶⁹ Suicide attacks have followed the same pattern as conventional attacks, the majority targeting frontier communities, markets and mosques and mainly killing civilians. None has targeted a church. Young girls have carried out most suicide attacks. Between July 2015 and October 2016, they left at least 290 dead and more than 800 wounded. There was a particularly large number of suicide attacks in January and February 2016.

B. *Boko Haram Recruitment and Financing*

1. Recruitment

Since at least as early as 2011, between 3,500 and 4,000 Cameroonians, overwhelmingly men, are believed to have joined Boko Haram as fighters, spiritual guides and logisticians. More have been sympathisers of the group, particularly when the conflict was at its peak. However, few rose to the leadership level.

The Cameroonians in Boko Haram are almost all young men who come from poor families and are little educated if at all. However, some sons of imams and traditional chiefs, some youths with high school education and the children of prosperous traders have been involved.⁷⁰ Boko Haram has drawn on socio-economic motivations, ideology and religion, force and/or persuasion to secure recruits. In certain cases, a taste for adventure or a desire for personal revenge have played a role. Some people report the presence of women who have chosen to join the movement, working in logistics and intelligence. These are reportedly often wives or sisters of jihadists or women looking for a higher social status.⁷¹

The main recruitments took place in 2013 and 2014. Although concentrated in border areas and the three most affected departments, they also concerned Maroua

⁶⁷ Crisis Group estimates based on open sources and interviews with administrative authorities and the security forces. "Violations and Abuses Committed by Boko Haram and the Impact on Human Rights in the Affected Countries", United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 29 September 2015; issues 629, 673, 695 and 747 of *L'œil du Sahel*; and "Cameroun. Boko Haram : 1 200 morts depuis 2013", BBC, 15 January 2016.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, senior BIR officer, Kolofata, March 2016.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group estimate based on information provided by BIR-Alpha, Emergence 4 and open sources.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interviews, former hostages and residents of border communities, Far North, March-May 2016.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interviews, refugees, humanitarian actors and security forces, Minawao and Mora, March-May 2016. "Mayo Sava : 9 femmes de Boko Haram arrêtées par l'armée", *L'œil du Sahel*, 17 December 2015.

and probably towns further south, such as Yaoundé, the capital city, or Bertoua and Fouban, where Boko Haram recruiting agents have been reported.⁷²

Boko Haram has taken advantage of the local vulnerabilities outlined above. It has provided disenfranchised youths seeking a sense of identity with a paid job, legitimised by religion, and has lured them with the promise of higher social status. It has also proved adept at exploiting inter-generational tensions, stirring up the resentment of young people toward their parents' generation.⁷³ Another important factor has been ethnic identity – which extends across modern national borders: shared social memory of the Kanem-Bornou and Wandala empires remains deeply anchored across the region, providing fertile ground for anti-Western ideologies to prosper. In a number of places, Boko Haram has recruited among the Kanuri community through existing links between families and within peer groups.⁷⁴ However, Crisis Group research found no strong ethnic factor in Boko Haram's strategic choices.⁷⁵

The vast majority of Cameroonian recruits have joined the sect for socio-economic reasons: Boko Haram provides them with a motorbike and a recruitment bonus ranging from 300 up to 2,000 dollars and promises salaries of between 100 and 400 dollars during the initial months – as well as a substantial sum of money to the family of any fighter killed in combat. Once recruited, new fighters are re-indoctrinated and drugged with Tramol, and paid only on the success of their operations. Promises of money are backed up with social ones: for most young men in the area, marriage is an essential ingredient of social success and Boko Haram often provided wives for its fighters by kidnapping hundreds of young girls.⁷⁶

In 2011, ideological recruitment campaigns got underway among Cameroonian students in Nigeria and among the Kanuri, Choa Arabs and Mandara in Cameroon itself.⁷⁷ According to agents of the security forces who have interrogated members of Boko Haram, those who have been recruited on an ideological basis are intensely radicalised, almost cult followers of Abubakar Shekau, the presumed leader of Boko Haram. Members arrested two years ago continue to adhere to the sect's ideology – which blends religious radicalism such as jihadist Salafism, takfirism and kadjirism

⁷² “L'enrôlement des jeunes dans les groupes armés au Cameroun”, World Dynamics of Young People, Yaoundé, November 2015.

⁷³ Recruits were asked to kill their own parents. Those who did so were promoted more rapidly, having proved their devotion to Allah and to Boko Haram. The imam of Kerawa's central mosque and several of his relatives were killed by their own children. Crisis Group interviews, senior community figures, Kerawa, April 2016. However, some Boko Haram militants retain affection for their families and often telephone them to get news. Crisis Group interviews, Boko Haram members detained in Maroua and families of Boko Haram militants, Far North, March-June 2016.

⁷⁴ Some Boko Haram members based in Nigeria often call their brothers and friends, or contact them through WhatsApp to suggest that they join the movement or ask for money or food supplies. Crisis Group interviews, local NGOs and families of Boko Haram members, Far North, March-May 2016.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interviews, residents and academics, Far North, March 2016. Christian Seignobos, “Boko Haram : innovation guerrière depuis les monts mandara”, *Afrique contemporaine*, vol. 4, no. 252 (2014), pp. 149-169.

⁷⁶ Former hostages report that young men in Boko Haram spend their time listening to Shekau's preaching and talking about girls and marriage. Crisis Group interviews, Maroua, March 2016.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interviews, traditional chiefs and administrative authorities, Mora and Kousseri, March 2016.

with an anti-Western outlook.⁷⁸ In proposing to create a caliphate, Boko Haram exploits folk memory of the ancient Kanem-Bornu Empire.⁷⁹ While the majority of radicals were recruited early on, in 2011, a further wave of young people joined the group after the caliphate had been proclaimed in 2014, thinking that Boko Haram was going to win the war.⁸⁰

Those kidnapped or forcibly recruited from 2012 onwards constitute a third group of recruits. Some individuals were indirectly pressured by radicalised friends into joining Boko Haram or opted to do so after coming under suspicion, or as a reaction against abuses committed by the army or the authorities' lack of interest in the Far North. Others joined the sect after losing their means of livelihood – like motorcycle taxi drivers who had been prevented from working or people who had been engaged in cross-border trade.⁸¹

At first, most recruits were ethnically Kanuri, but the pool has become more diverse, ranging from Islamicised ethnic groups such as the Choa Arabs, the Mandara, Kotoko and Hausa to the largely non-Muslim Kirdi ethnic groups such as the Maffa, Mada and Kapsiki. Kanuri's vulnerability, rather than a Kanuri rebellion or their supposed desire to revive an old empire, explains why they form a large part of the recruits. Boko Haram took advantage of their tradition of rigorist Islam, poverty and low school enrolment rates, and of their links with north-eastern Nigeria through their proximity to the border, Quranic education ties and trade.⁸²

Fundamentally, people joined the group for a broad range of reasons. There is no simple model that explains how Boko Haram attracted recruits in Cameroon or that could prevent people from joining. In contrast to the situation in some other countries in conflict with jihadist groups, Cameroon's populations do not question the legitimacy of the state, despite its weak presence in the Far North. This legitimacy is also reinforced by the alliance between the Biya regime and traditional chiefs who retain considerable influence over the local population. So the sort of anti-state rhetoric that plays well in north-eastern Nigeria does not resonate in the Far North; were it otherwise, Boko Haram probably would have attracted more recruits there.

2. Sources of funding

The payment of ransoms for the release of hostages – particularly foreigners – is one of Boko Haram's main sources of funding. However, it remains a subject of controversy: the authorities involved usually deny having paid any ransoms to armed groups. On 19 February 2013, seven French citizens, including an employee of GDF-Suez, Tanguy Moulin-Fournier, were kidnapped in the Waza National Park (Logone and Chari); on 13 November 2013, a French priest was abducted in Nguetchewe (Mayo Tsanaga); on 19 April 2014, two Italian priests and a Canadian nun were kidnapped

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interviews, prison staff, BIR-Alpha and gendarmerie, Yaoundé and Far North, February-April 2016.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group Report, *Curbing Violence in Nigeria*, op. cit.; Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, *Islam, Politics and Security and the State in Nigeria* (Leiden, 2014), p. 285.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interviews, security forces and administrative authorities, Mora, March 2016.

⁸¹ Crisis Group interviews, academic, journalists, traditional chiefs and local NGOs, Maroua, Mora and Kousseri, March 2016.

⁸² It is the Far North community with the largest number of *gonis* – individuals whose Islamic knowledge is so deep that they can recite 6,000 verses of the Quran by heart. Crisis Group interviews, academic and Kanuri imam, Maroua, March 2016.

in Tchere (Diamaré); in May 2014, ten Chinese workers were abducted in Waza; and in July 2014, the wife of the vice prime minister and sixteen members of his inner circle – all Cameroonian – were kidnapped in Kolofata (Mayo Sava).

The Moulin-Fournier family was freed in November 2013 in return for a ransom payment reported by Cameroonian sources as \$5 to 7 million and by Nigerian sources as \$3.15 million together with the release of sixteen Boko Haram members who had been in detention in Cameroon, including logisticians who had already been tried and convicted.⁸³ Similarly, the release of Father Vandenbeusch on 31 December 2013 reportedly led to the payment of a ransom and the freeing of Boko Haram members, including the prominent logistician Djida Umar.⁸⁴ Cameroonian intermediaries allegedly secured the release of the Italian priests and the Canadian nun on 29 May 2014.⁸⁵

The release of 27 hostages – ten Chinese and seventeen Cameroonian members of the vice prime minister's inner circle – on 10 October 2014 is said to have proved more costly. These hostages were considered so valuable that Boko Haram managed to extract a payment of FCFA3.2 billion (\$5.7 million) – FCFA1.5 billion (\$2.6 million) for the Chinese and FCFA1.7 billion (\$3.1 million) for the vice prime minister's family – together with the release of 31 of its members, including senior figures such as Abakar Ali.⁸⁶

These negotiations saw the sole contact for humanitarian purposes there has ever been between Boko Haram and the Cameroonian army – to arrange for the return of the bodies of dead soldiers. The group explained to negotiators that Shekau had attacked the house of the vice prime minister to take revenge for the failure to honour promises to release prisoners.⁸⁷ During the negotiations, a Cameroonian mem-

⁸³ Crisis Group interviews, administrative authorities, Yaoundé, Maroua and Mora, March-April 2016. "Politique : révélations sur la libération des otages français", *L'œil du Sahel*, 22 April 2013; "Nigerian Islamists got 3.15 millions dollars to free French hostages", Reuters, 26 April 2015. On a number of occasions, the French government has denied that a ransom was paid. "La France dément avoir versé une rançon pour la libération des otages", *lemonde.fr*, 26 April 2013.

⁸⁴ Authorities in Mayo Tsanaga – where the abduction took place – confirmed the payment of a ransom; this sparked a row between the speaker of the National Assembly and a local chief who, at the speaker's request, had provided money from his personal funds to pay the ransom, against the promise that he would be reimbursed. "Libération du père Georges Vandenbeusch : le négociateur désigné de Boko Haram réclame son argent", *L'œil du Sahel*, 6 January 2014. Crisis Group interview, administrative authority, Mokolo, Maroua, March 2016. The French government denied that any ransom had been paid. "Le prêtre Georges Vandenbeusch est rentré en France", *liberation.fr*, 1 January 2014.

⁸⁵ The amount of the ransom is unknown. "Extrême-Nord : comment les trois otages ont été libérés?", *L'œil du Sahel*, 2 June 2014. The Canadian government has denied that a ransom was paid, while the Italian government thanked the Cameroonian authorities and the Canadian government in a statement. "Release of Canadian nun, Italian priests spurs questions about ransom payments", *globeandmail.com*, 1 June 2014. The Italian government recently declared that it was opposed to the payment of ransoms. "Italy denies paying ransom for release of aid workers", *The New York Times*, 16 January 2015.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interviews, inner circle of the vice prime minister, Yaoundé, April 2016. "Boko Haram : les dessous de la libération des 27 otages", *L'œil du Sahel*, 13 October 2014. The Cameroonian authorities remained vague about whether a ransom had been paid. "Cameroun : libération d'otages chinois et camerounais de Boko Haram", *20minutes.fr*, 11 October 2014.

⁸⁷ After the battle of Bargaram and Kamouna on 24-25 July, which claimed the lives of 22 soldiers, the army established contacts to secure the return of some bodies – which were handed over in an encounter in Greya. Boko Haram representatives stated that Amadou Ali had been targeted because

ber of parliament, acting as intermediary, was taken to Sambissa, in Nigeria, where he held talks with Shekau.⁸⁸ The *lamido* of Kolofata and former hostages state that they were held in one of Boko Haram's key Sambissa strongholds, commanded by Habib Mohammed Yusuf – the son of Mohammed Yusuf, according to the BIR.⁸⁹ In all, at least 45 Boko Haram men were freed in exchange for 38 foreign and Cameroonian hostages who had been kidnapped in 2013 and 2014. The total value of ransom payments is estimated at a minimum of \$11 million.⁹⁰ Leading figures of the Far North – a member of the government, members of the parliament and traditional chiefs – acted as intermediaries and used their contact networks during the negotiations.

In Cameroon, Boko Haram has also raised funds by stealing cattle and selling them in the markets of the Far North and in Nigeria.⁹¹ Since 2013, the group has stolen at least 12,000 heads of cattle – worth around FCFA2 billion (\$3.4 million) – and thousands of sheep and goats in the Far North.⁹² It has also grown richer by extorting money from local traders and those operating on the roads to Nigeria, or by asking for financial contributions to the jihad.⁹³ Finally, it managed to establish itself in the Far North by building alliances with *blamas* (district chiefs) and *lawans* (second-ranking chiefs), traders and transport operators, smugglers and former highway bandits – and by setting up a leadership team for Cameroon.

In the Far North, depending on the place and time, Boko Haram has been a sectarian movement rejecting the state, a rebel movement inspired by religious ideas, a particularly violent criminal group – but above all, an undertaking relying on terrorist tactics. Today it seems to have lost its appeal to young people: the defeats it has suffered and the indiscriminate killings it has carried out have persuaded the vast majority – including the followers of fundamentalist Islam – that it is neither an

of his broken promise – made during negotiations over the Italian priests – to free about ten prisoners. Crisis Group interviews, security forces and intelligence officers, 2016.

⁸⁸ “Cameroun : les contours de la libération de 27 otages enlevés par Boko Haram”, *L'œil du Sahel*, 16 October 2014; “Fin de séjour de l'honorable Abba Malla chez Boko Haram”, *L'œil du Sahel*, 31 August 2014.

⁸⁹ Nigeria also describes Habib Yusuf as the son of Mohammed Yusuf. In August 2016, Islamic State named him as its new leader in West Africa, replacing Abubakar Shekau. Crisis Group interview, *lamido* of Kolofata, Yaoundé, April 2016; and Crisis Group telephone interviews, security forces in Maiduguri, July 2016. “Boko Haram in Nigeria: Abu Musab al-Barnawi named as new leader”, BBC, 3 August 2016.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group estimate based on open sources and several interviews with sources involved in the case, including negotiators, systematically selecting the lowest figure from among the various cross-referenced estimates. Crisis Group interviews, Yaoundé and Far North, January-May 2016.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interviews, administrative authorities and police chief, Maroua and Mokolo, March 2016.

⁹² The biggest thefts were: 4,244 head of cattle in January 2016 in Makary, Hile Alifa and Fotokol, 500 head in Ashigashia on 5 November 2014, 350 head on 6 December 2014 in Guidi, 200 head on 20 January in Djibiré and around 7,000 sheep and cattle from 2013 until 2015 in Mayo Moskota. More than 90 other thefts of cattle occurred between 2014 and June 2016. Tally established by Crisis Group based on open sources and interviews in the Far North in 2016. A single cow sells for an average FCFA200,000 (\$332) in the region and Boko Haram receivers sold them at FCFA150,000 (\$249). Crisis Group interviews, researchers at the Institut supérieur du Sahel and administrative authorities, Maroua and Mokolo, March 2016.

⁹³ They asked those who could not afford to pay to transport supplies and munitions. Crisis Group interviews, traders and transporters, Kousseri, March 2016.

incarnation of true Islam nor the way toward an alternative political and social order. The movement has thus lost many sympathisers in frontier communities. It has also been weakened by the destruction of its arms caches and a number of its supply lines.

In June 2016, the Cameroonian authorities estimated that fewer than 1,000 Cameroonians remained active members of Boko Haram.⁹⁴ Since July 2015, the group has no longer controlled any territory in the country or staged attacks involving hundreds of fighters there. But it still maintains networks of alliances and support and continues to conduct suicide bombings and attacks by groups of ten to 50 rebels against civilians and military posts in the Cameroonian section of Lake Chad and the departments of Mayo Sava and Mayo Tsanaga.

C. *The Impact of Boko Haram*

1. Political and security consequences

Cameroon's history has been marked by tensions between regional political elites. To some extent, this latest conflict has exposed such tensions in the Far North. The ruling CPDM and its ally, the National Union for Democracy and Progress (UNDP), are dominant in the region and the war against Boko Haram has thus bolstered the popularity of President Paul Biya. Despite the inadequacy of the government's social and economic interventions and the fact that Biya has not visited the Far North since the start of the conflict, many residents are grateful for the state's newfound concern for the region.⁹⁵ But the war has also aggravated rivalries between local political figures – as evidenced by the acrimony between the Vice Prime Minister Amadou Ali and the Speaker of the National Assembly Cavaye Jibril, and the quarrels that broke out in the CPDM when its grassroots bodies were renewed in October 2015.⁹⁶

At the national and international levels, this war has strengthened the president. Despite some criticisms, many Cameroonians are satisfied with Biya's response to Boko Haram.⁹⁷ He has also gained credibility in diplomatic circles, particularly the French ones, through his personal involvement in efforts to secure the freedom of French hostages.⁹⁸ In parallel, campaigns by private media favoured and funded by close associates of the president have reinforced an existing anti-French mood.⁹⁹

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, senior officers, Yaoundé, June 2016.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, residents, Far North, 2015-2016.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, CPDM mayors and municipal councillors, Far North, 2016.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, residents, Far North, North, Adamawa (Cameroon), Fouban, Mbal-mayo, Douala and Yaoundé, 2015-2016.

⁹⁸ Paul Biya was cold-shouldered diplomatically by France before the war, and received in Paris in 2012 in a manner that Cameroonians regarded as humiliating. But he has subsequently seen a string of French government figures turn up in Yaoundé, ranging from then Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius to President François Hollande. Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, Yaoundé and Paris, 2015-2016.

⁹⁹ This manoeuvre aims to damage France in the eyes of the Cameroonian public and thus limit its scope to demand political reforms. Crisis Group interviews, senior officials and journalists, Yaoundé, 2015-2016. Crisis Group Report, *Cameroon: The Threat of Religious Radicalism*, op. cit.; Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle, "Les violences dans l'Extrême-Nord du Cameroun : le complot comme outil d'interprétation et de luttes politiques", *Politique Africaine*, no. 138 (2015); and "Au Cameroun, la montée d'un sentiment anti-français", *Le Monde*, 3 July 2015.

The war has not much influenced how the north and south of Cameroon perceive each other, even if, initially, southern observers thought this was a case of rebellion by northerners.¹⁰⁰ Northern Cameroon has not suffered any erosion of its representation in the ranks of the government or the senior civil service. However, it has reinforced the feeling among officials that it is best to avoid being posted to the Far North.¹⁰¹

The army has been the big winner from the war, despite suffering losses. It has earned the support of many Cameroonians who had previously blamed the military for repressing the democracy movement in the 1990s and the unrest of February 2008 and who for the first time have seen evidence of its effectiveness and usefulness.¹⁰² The credibility of the army has also been boosted in the eyes of international partners, who have enjoyed a cooperative relationship with their Cameroonian counterparts.¹⁰³

But although there have been incidental benefits for the president and the army, the fact that the Far North proved fertile terrain for Boko Haram reveals a deep crisis. Prospects for the region, populated in the majority by young people with limited economic opportunities, depend heavily on Yaoundé. But links with the capital and the “productive” south of Cameroon are seen as the fiefdom of an elderly elite whose position is increasingly challenged in the political, religious and social spheres.

2. Economic consequences

The struggle against Boko Haram puts great strain on Cameroon’s development objectives.¹⁰⁴ The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that between 2014 and 2015, security expenditure increased by some 1-2 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) – that is FCFA189-378 billion (\$320-640 million).¹⁰⁵ But the overall economic impact was greater still.

The conflict has eroded the economic structures in the Far North, pushing tens of thousands who lived from trade with Nigeria into poverty or bankruptcy. Some moved to N’Djamena because of the insecurity and the closure of the border with Nigeria.¹⁰⁶ The city of Kousseri, which used to be Cameroon’s second largest source

¹⁰⁰ Northern Cameroon is little known to southerners, who generally see it as a homogenous entity in political and religious terms. Since power moved from the north to the south in 1982 and the abortive coup by northern soldiers in 1984, some of the southern elite have been haunted by the prospect of the northerners returning to power – particularly as some northern political barons do believe that power should revert to them when Paul Biya is gone. Thus, several media favoured by the president’s inner circle have reported Boko Haram as a northern rebellion supported by France. Populations in the Far North have felt unfairly stigmatised by the accusations emanating from the south, when it is they who are paying a heavy price for the conflict. Crisis Group interviews, academics and senior officials originally from the Far North, Yaoundé and Maroua, 2016.

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group interviews, groups of officials, 2015-2016.

¹⁰² In contrast to the Bakassi conflict (1993-2002), the one with Boko Haram has received heavy media coverage and has been followed practically in real time through social media.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group interviews, American and European diplomats, Yaoundé, March 2016.

¹⁰⁴ According to the INS, a growth rate clearly above 7 per cent would be needed to reduce poverty. It was 6 per cent in 2015. “La croissance du Cameroun à 6% en 2015, estime le FMI”, *Jeune Afrique*, 25 September 2015. Crisis Group interviews, INS researchers, Yaoundé, July 2016.

¹⁰⁵ “Sub-Saharan Africa: Time for a Policy Reset”, Regional Economic Outlook, IMF, April 2016, p. 24.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Kousseri market, March 2016.

of customs revenues from non-oil-related activity after Douala, was severely affected, as were important customs posts that are currently shut, such as Limani, Fotokol, Blamé, Blangoua and Dabanga.¹⁰⁷

The conflict and its consequences – the destruction of schools, hospitals, administrative buildings and, sometimes, entire villages, the theft of cattle and brutal halt to tourism – paralysed the local economy, which now accounts for only 5 per cent of Cameroon's GDP, compared with 7.3 per cent before the conflict.¹⁰⁸ The shortfall at the national level – the indirect economic cost – amounts to around \$740 million a year, and thus \$2.2 billion since 2014.¹⁰⁹

3. Social and intercommunal consequences

This conflict has had an impact on inter-communal dynamics, leading to the stigmatisation of the Kanuri, the ethnic group most heavily represented among the ranks of Boko Haram, although it has not triggered acts of violence against them. The Kanuri have been harassed by the security forces – often after being the target of far-fetched accusations.¹¹⁰ Residents of Kousseri have referred to displaced Kanuri fleeing violence as “Boko Haram” and refused to rent homes to them.¹¹¹ In Maroua prison, Kanuri detainees have been regarded with mistrust by other prisoners and harassed by the security forces.¹¹² Kanuri women, suspected of being suicide bombers, have been closely monitored.

The situation of women in general is worrying: those who manage to escape from Boko Haram are often rejected by the communities they come from.¹¹³ In contrast, the war against Boko Haram has not had a significant impact on relations between Christians and Muslims, although this was a serious risk.¹¹⁴ Similarly, Boko Haram violence generated few intercommunal tensions, except between Kanuri and Choa Arabs in Logone and Chari.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Sultan of Kousseri, customs officers and traders, Far North, March-October 2016.

¹⁰⁸ No evaluation of the value of destroyed infrastructure has yet been carried out. Crisis Group interviews, senior officials in the economy, planning and regional development ministry (Minepat) and statisticians, Yaoundé, June-October 2016; regional customs and tax services directors, Maroua, October 2016. In 2014, Cameroon's GDP was \$32 billion, according to the World Bank.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group estimate. The indirect cost of the war is the lost potential economic output and revenue and is calculated by combining the slowdown of growth and the fall in Far North's contribution to the national budget and GDP. This cost equates to almost the entire budget proposed in the 2014 development plan for the north.

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, residents and mayors in border communities, Far North, 2015.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interviews, displaced Kanuri and Glavda families, Kousseri and Mora, March 2016.

¹¹² Crisis Group interviews, prison staff and director of the Central Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (REDHAC), Maroua, April 2016; and “Prison de Maroua : 795 membres de Boko Haram en détention”, *L'œil du Sahel*, 30 May 2016.

¹¹³ “Beyond Chibok”, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), April 2016; “Bad blood”, UNICEF International Alert, February 2016; “Dans l'intimité des victimes sexuelles de Boko Haram”, *Intégration*, 6 June 2016.

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, administrative authorities, local people and religious leaders, Douala, Yaoundé, Fouban and northern Cameroon, 2014-2016.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, traditional chiefs, local population and administrative authorities, Maroua, Logone and Chari, March 2016.

At present, Cameroon counts more than 155,000 internally displaced persons and 73,000 Nigerian refugees linked to the conflict with Boko Haram.¹¹⁶ The arrival of displaced populations has created tensions with host families, who for the most part also needed help, but these strains have eased since humanitarian NGOs are on the ground.¹¹⁷ In 2014 and 2015, Cameroon expelled more than 40,000 Nigerian refugees, the majority by force and often in conditions that failed to meet the requirements of international law – which angered the Nigerian authorities, particularly in August 2015.¹¹⁸ This troubled the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which drafted a tripartite agreement between Cameroon, UNHCR and Nigeria to facilitate refugees' voluntary return. This has still not been signed, but the forced repatriations have ceased since 2016.¹¹⁹ The 73,000 remaining refugees live in the Minawao camp (59,000) and in host communities where their presence does not pose a particular problem.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ "Lake Chad Basin: Crisis Update No. 9", UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), 1 November 2016.

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian NGOs, families hosting displaced people and administrative authorities, Far North, 2016.

¹¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian NGOs, Maroua, Kousseri, March 2016.

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group email correspondence, UNHCR representative in Cameroon, September 2016.

¹²⁰ Crisis Group interview, UNHCR representative, Yaoundé, April 2016.

IV. Responding to Boko Haram

A. *The Government's Security Response*

Faced with Boko Haram, the government initially resorted to a strategy of denial. Out of negligence and because of historic tensions with its neighbour, but also to avoid being targeted by the jihadist group, up to 2013 it preferred to stay out of a problem that was perceived as internal to Nigeria.¹²¹ But once confronted by the movement's more aggressive approach, it adopted relatively effective security measures. This response has been structured around Operation Alpha led by the BIR (BIR-Alpha) and Operation Emergence 4, led by the fourth inter-service military region (RM-IA4, the regular army).¹²² The bilateral Operation Logone, carried out in 2015 by the Cameroonian and Chadian armed forces, was additional. The deployment of the Cameroonian sector of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in October 2015 constituted the final component of this security response.

Cameroon's security response suffered from initial shortcomings, which cost dearly in soldiers' lives: lack of, old or unreliable equipment (inappropriate bullet-proof vests, weapons that did not work, a shortage of night vision goggles), breakdowns in logistical support.¹²³ A shortage of personnel and the weak operational capacity of the army caused major difficulties for troop rotation in Emergence 4: in 2014 and 2015, soldiers sometimes spent nine months in forward bases such as Mabass, Ldamang and Tourou without being relieved. There were also problems in the command structure: at first, there was little cooperation between Emergence 4 and BIR-Alpha.¹²⁴

Similarly, at the outset there was a notable lack of cooperation with local communities – a problem compounded by army abuses and the fact that the majority of deployed soldiers were southerners who did not understand the local languages. Human and electronic intelligence capacities were extremely limited.¹²⁵ According to Amnesty International, the army committed numerous abuses and human rights

¹²¹ The Bakassi conflict between Cameroon and Nigeria made cooperation in tackling Boko Haram difficult. The frontier between the two countries has still not been fully delineated in the area where the group operates. When the Nigerians demanded hot pursuit rights, senior Cameroonian officers feared a ploy to establish a foothold in the Far North. Crisis Group interviews, presidential Security Directorate, senior army officers and foreign ministry, Yaoundé, 2016. Guy Roger Eba'a, *Affaire Bakassi : 1993-2002* (Yaoundé, 2008).

¹²² BIR-Alpha is a force established by the BIR general staff to fight against Boko Haram. Its troops are drawn from the five land units of the BIRs and seconded to Alpha for a year. BIR-Alpha is distinct from the first land unit of the BIR based at Maroua. Crisis Group interview, deputy chief of staff of BIR-Alpha, Kolofata, March 2016. Cameroon is divided into four inter-service military regions (RMIA) and RMIA4 corresponds to the administrative region of the Far North. The concept of "Emergence" dates back to 2001, but was put into operation to confront Boko Haram. Crisis Group interview, brigadier general, Maroua, March 2016.

¹²³ In 2014, 67 soldiers were killed; in 2015, 41, and from January to August 2016, seventeen. Crisis Group interviews, international military experts, Yaoundé, March-April 2016.

¹²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, senior officers, Yaoundé and Maroua, February-March 2016. Interview by a Crisis Group analyst in a former capacity, international soldier, Yaoundé, February 2015.

¹²⁵ A lack of cooperation with the Nigerian army and rivalries between the intelligence agencies worsened the situation – to the point where the DGRE, the most important intelligence service, had to call on top-level political intervention to secure access to Boko Haram commanders arrested by the police and gendarmerie. Crisis Group interviews, intelligence officers, Yaoundé, September 2014-May 2016.

violations against the populations in the Far North.¹²⁶ The government denies this and insists that disciplinary measures were taken against “black sheep”.¹²⁷ Crisis Group has witnessed abuses by the security forces in the region, but also a high degree of support for the army.¹²⁸

However, the disciplinary measures that have been taken are inadequate, given the extent of the cases identified by Amnesty International. Moreover, the government’s response has so far been limited to these measures and does not encompass official apologies or material compensation for the victims or their families that could reinforce social cohesion. Much is at stake when it comes to respect for human rights, because the exponential growth of abuses in the Far North could push some young people, caught between Boko Haram’s hammer and the army’s anvil, to join the jihadist group. This also risks jeopardising military cooperation between Cameroon and Western countries; that is what happened in Nigeria, whose army committed serious human rights violations.¹²⁹

Cameroon has managed to make up for lost ground quite effectively. In 2013 and 2014, small reinforcements were sent to the border area: 700 extra troops were deployed in June 2014, and 2,000 in August. BIR-Alpha was established in 2014 and Operation Emergence 3 – which later became Emergence 4 – was put into action in the same year. In August 2014, the government reorganised the structure of the military, establishing the Far North as the fourth inter-service military region and the fourth gendarmerie region (RG4). The incumbent generals were replaced with colonels who were originally from the area, a gendarmerie unit was specifically created in Kousseri, several brigades of motorised infantry were mobilised and the headquarters of the 41st motorised infantry brigade was transferred from Maroua to Kousseri.

Army equipment was improved too and cooperation between Emergence 4 and BIR-Alpha improved noticeably. The army launched numerous initiatives in support of the populations, such as the distribution of medicines and food, medical check-ups and work on local roads. Intelligence improved, in part thanks to the purchase of tactical drones and a Cessna surveillance aircraft, and to enhanced cooperation with Nigerian counterparts.¹³⁰ Even the army’s communication was modernised: the defence ministry organised 24 visits to the front by journalists – which partly explains the current popularity of the army in the Cameroonian media.¹³¹

¹²⁶ Amnesty International has documented forced disappearances, arrests and arbitrary detentions, cases of financial extortion, raids on villages and mass killings, etc. The organisation has also criticised the judicial system, particularly conditions of detention in jails – Maroua prison, designed for 350 prisoners, actually holds 1,552 – and a judicial process that shows little respect for defence rights. “Right Cause, Wrong Means: Human Rights Violated and Justice Denied in Cameroon’s Fight against Boko Haram”, Amnesty International, July 2016.

¹²⁷ The measures include disciplinary assignments, exclusion from the army or prosecution. Crisis Group interviews, foreign affairs ministry and defence ministry, Yaoundé, April-September 2016.

¹²⁸ Crisis Group interviews, residents, Far North and Yaoundé, 2016. The recent Amnesty International report on Cameroon provoked a plethora of fierce criticism by journalists and the civil society – a sign of the army’s newfound popularity.

¹²⁹ “Afadé : 3 militaires accusés d’exactions interpellés”, *L’œil du Sahel*, 25 July 2016.

¹³⁰ Drones and surveillance material were purchased from Israel and the U.S., armoured vehicles, helicopters, and combat aircraft from China, Russia, South Africa and the U.S. Crisis Group interviews, BIR officers and European military experts, Far North and Yaoundé, March-April 2016.

¹³¹ Crisis Group observations, Cameroon, 2016. “In the Tracks of Boko Haram ...”, op. cit.

Cameroon now has around 8,500 troops in the Far North region – a seventh of its defence forces' manpower.¹³² Even so, the military response is lacking in some respects. The troops are still not adequately provided for. Emergence 4 remains undermanned, causing problems for troop rotations.¹³³ Abuses continue, albeit probably less than hitherto. Some Emergence 4 soldiers have seen their promotions effectively frozen because they are not free to take the required training courses, while those who have remained in Yaoundé have been promoted.¹³⁴ Since the creation of the MNJTF, Alpha and Emergence 4 have been able to officially carry out operations against Boko Haram in Nigeria, in collaboration with Nigerian troops. BIR-Alpha operations in Nigeria go under the name of "Arrow" and those of Emergence 4 are labelled "Tentacles".¹³⁵

The shock caused by the first attacks in Cameroon, particularly those in Maroua, has led since July 2015 to the adoption of new administrative and security measures such as bans on the full face veil (*burqa*), on public gatherings and on the use of motorbikes, the imposition of a 6pm closing time for bars, numerous inspections and searches, the monitoring or even closure of mosques and the arrest of supposedly radical imams and the reinforcement of police and gendarmerie manpower for intelligence assignments.¹³⁶ While these measures have mostly been accepted by the population, some initiatives, and the ensuing excesses, have stirred discontent. The anti-terrorist law that had been adopted much earlier, in December 2014, has so far been used more to pressure the opposition and civil society than against Boko Haram.¹³⁷ The ban on wearing the *burqa* has led to numerous abuses by the police and gendarmerie in the Far North, including against women wearing the *niqab*, the hijab or the *soudaré* – a type of headscarf similar to the *jilbab* or the *chador* that is widespread in the area.¹³⁸

Detention is another tool of the security strategy. Since 2014, the security forces have arrested at least 970 presumed members of Boko Haram, mostly men, of whom 880 are still detained: 125 have been convicted and around 755 are awaiting trial

¹³² BIR-Alpha has 2,400 men, the MNJTF 2,300 – out of a planned 2,600 – and Emergence 4 1,800 men. Also present in RG4 are units of the gendarmerie and the Maroua-based first land unit of the BIR. Crisis Group interviews, senior officers, Maroua, March 2016, and officers from the southern area of the BIR, Kolofata, March 2016.

¹³³ Contrary to the official line, the problem is not a shortage of manpower in the army – which has more than 60,000 troops – but rather in the soldiers' efforts to avoid being posted to the Far North, by finding pretexts to remain in the south. Crisis Group interviews, soldiers, Maroua, Maltam and Kousseri, March 2016.

¹³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, soldiers in Emergence 4, Far North, March 2016.

¹³⁵ For a detailed outline of all the operations, see Appendix B.

¹³⁶ "Terrorisme : les 9 mesures phares prises par le Cameroun pour se protéger de Boko Haram", *Jeune Afrique*, 29 July 2015.

¹³⁷ Journalists have been prosecuted for failing to condemn acts of terrorism, and researchers have been arrested in the north. In 2015 and 2016, opposition and civil society figures were briefly detained on a number of occasions and their demonstrations were often banned. "Cameroon: Authorities must drop 'non-denunciation' charges against three journalists", Amnesty International, 21 January 2016; "Cameroun : Ahmed Abba, déjà un an derrière les barreaux", RFI, 30 July 2016. Crisis Group interviews, opposition and civil society figures, prefect, Yaoundé, June 2016.

¹³⁸ In 2015, Maroua residents complained to the governor, who advised the security forces to exercise greater restraint in carrying out security checks. By contrast, in Adamawa (Cameroon), local people say they appreciate the flexibility with which this measure is applied. Crisis Group interviews, academics and residents, Maroua, March 2016.

in Maroua prison (about 680), Kousseri and Mora local jails, the main prison in Yaoundé and the General Directorate for External Research (DGRE).¹³⁹ Among these prisoners are senior ideologues and operational commanders, on the one hand, and informers, forcibly recruited members and junior logisticians on the other. Boko Haram members in Maroua jail are incarcerated with common law detainees. Some prison authorities present this as a technique for de-radicalisation, but mixing the two categories of detainees carries the inverse risk that common criminals will become indoctrinated or that members who were initially less extreme will become more radicalised.¹⁴⁰

Furthermore, the judicial response has so far been limited to sanctions (punitive justice) and does not include a program for reintegration into society. Among the almost 1,000 presumed Boko Haram members in detention, the majority have only played minor roles in logistics or as informers, for financial reward, without being converted to the ideology of the jihadist group – or they have been arrested for failing to report suspects. Subjected to punitive judicial treatment, they fill up prisons and are at increased risk of radicalisation.¹⁴¹

B. *The Vigilante Groups: Effectiveness versus Risks*

In Cameroon, self-defence groups and vigilante groups have existed since the 1960s, and in the Far North these vigilante groups were activated or created in July 2015, after the first suicide attacks. They have usually been activated by the authorities but there are cases where the populations have taken the initiative. They are placed under the authority of sub-prefects and traditional chiefs and generally provide local intelligence to the army, sometimes also operating checkpoints or forming self-defence militias. They have foiled about fifteen suicide attacks and helped to secure the arrest of about 100 Boko Haram members.¹⁴² In 2016, they became involved in some army operations against the jihadist group, including in Nigeria.¹⁴³

However, reliance on these committees does carry some risks. False accusations have been made to the security forces as a way of settling scores.¹⁴⁴ Despite prior

¹³⁹ About 30 presumed members were found innocent and released, often after a year in detention. Crisis Group interviews, security forces and prison staff, Yaoundé and Far North, 2016.

¹⁴⁰ The fact that different categories of prisoner are mixed together is not the result of a justice ministry policy but a reflection of the shortage of prisons and prison overcrowding. However, some senior penal administration officials insist that this does help to de-radicalise some members of Boko Haram. They explain how, for several months, some of the group's senior members held at the main jail in Yaoundé have been praying with Muslim prisoners held over common criminal offences – and this has angered other members who accuse them of dirtying themselves and betrayal. Reportedly, a few have even agreed to talk to Christians, including the prison governor. But the majority remain deeply radical. Crisis Group interviews, governors and prison staff, Yaoundé, January-April 2016.

¹⁴¹ Cameroon prisons hold three to five times their supposed capacity of detainees. Crisis Group interviews, director of an association for the defence of human rights and prison staff, Yaoundé, 2016.

¹⁴² The BIR has trained several vigilante groups in the collection of intelligence. Crisis Group interview, senior BIR officer, Kolofata, March 2016.

¹⁴³ “Limani : 70 membres des comités de vigilance attaquent Boko Haram au Nigéria”, *L'œil du Sahel*, 3 May 2016; “Au Cameroun, les soldats de l'ombre oubliés de la lutte contre Boko Haram”, *Le Monde*, 30 March 2016.

¹⁴⁴ Crisis Group telephone interviews, administrative authorities in Maroua, November 2015.

personal background checks, there have been cases of complicity between some committee members and Boko Haram, while others have engaged in extortion on religious grounds.¹⁴⁵ For example, in Amchidé, Christian members of the first vigilante group set up by the BIR in 2014 made false accusations against Muslim residents and subjected them to extortion and blackmail. After six months, the committee was dissolved and formed again on a religious parity basis.¹⁴⁶

C. *The Frailty of Development Initiatives*

Confronted with Boko Haram, the government has announced development projects for the Far North but these remain limited in scale and implementation has been delayed. In June 2014, an emergency plan for the development of the north was published. But it is budgeted at a mere FCFA78.8 billion (\$135 million) and it is not yet operational. Yet in a letter to the president's office just months earlier, members of the government and senior officials originally from the north had estimated cost the development needs of the area at a minimum of FCFA1,600 billion (\$2.8 billion).¹⁴⁷ In March 2015, the government announced an emergency plan of FCFA5.3 billion (\$9 million) for the construction of schools and hospitals in the Far North. Beyond the inadequacy of the allocated funding, this project has been the subject of accusations of embezzlement. Yet a second similar plan is being prepared.¹⁴⁸

Of the FCFA925 billion (\$1.7 billion) of the Triennial Emergency Plan for the Acceleration of Growth and Employment, FCFA42 billion (\$75 million) are allocated to the Far North.¹⁴⁹ Similarly, in 2015, out of a national Public Investment Budget (BIP) of FCFA1,150 billion (\$2 billion), only FCFA45.4 billion (\$80 million) was reserved for the Far North – and that was an increase on the region's share in 2014.¹⁵⁰ Besides the government initiatives, the president has made donations to the populations of the Far North. The south of the country has also provided FCFA2.5 billion (\$4.2 million) in support for the region as well as food supplies. But in relation to this, too, there have been allegations of embezzlement.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁵ Crisis Group interviews, members of vigilante groups, Fotokol, Dabanga, Makary, Hile Alifa, April-May 2016. "Cameroun : des membres des comités de vigilance complices de Boko Haram", *L'œil du Sahel*, 7 December 2015.

¹⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, vigilante group and traditional chief, Amchidé, March-April 2016.

¹⁴⁷ Crisis Group interviews, senior officials and senior officers originally from the north, Yaoundé, 2016. "Plan d'urgence du grand Nord : les fausses promesses du gouvernement", *L'œil du Sahel*, 20 December 2014.

¹⁴⁸ Crisis Group interviews, administrative authorities and inhabitants, Maroua and Mora, March 2016.

¹⁴⁹ "Développement : un budget de 42 milliards pour l'Extrême-Nord", *cameroun24.net*, 8 January 2016.

¹⁵⁰ See the 2016 finance law. "BIP et plan d'urgence à l'Extrême-Nord : les recommandations du gouvernement", public contracts ministry, 22 July 2016; "Cameroun-BIP 2015 : inégale répartition du gâteau national", *237online.com*, 1 February 2015. Crisis Group email correspondence, senior officials and economists, July 2016.

¹⁵¹ Crisis Group interviews, administrative authorities, Yaoundé, Maroua and Mora, 2016. "Cameroun : 2,5 milliards FCFA collectés pour l'effort de guerre contre Boko Haram", *camerpost.com*, 17 April 2016.

D. *The Regional Response*

Faced with the Boko Haram threat, in 2015 the states of the Lake Chad Basin (Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger) and Benin set up a multinational force of 8,700 soldiers and police drawn from all five countries.¹⁵² At the start of the crisis, Cameroon was wary of bilateral or sub-regional initiatives and in 2012, it did not grant cross-border hot pursuit rights to Nigeria – however, this did not prevent the latter from intervening twice, in Amchidé and Fotokol, in 2013.¹⁵³ As the conflict intensified, Cameroon demanded hot pursuit rights from Nigeria in 2014 and, in cooperation with Chad, launched Operation Logone in January 2015. Indeed, Cameroonian soldiers often advanced as far as Gambaru and Banki in Nigeria and, from Cameroonian territory, bombarded Boko Haram positions in that country in 2014 and 2015.¹⁵⁴ Cooperation with Nigeria has markedly improved since Muhammadu Buhari's May 2015 accession to power in Abuja, to the point where the Cameroonian sector of the MNJTF is the only one that is operational. The two armies carry out coordinated operations and regularly exchange intelligence.¹⁵⁵

One week after Cameroon's president had appealed on 7 January 2015 for international and regional solidarity, Chad offered to intervene on the territory of its neighbour. Chad has felt concerned since September 2014, when Boko Haram seized control of the road from Maiduguri to Fotokol and was threatening the Mora-Kousseri route – the two main supply corridors to N'Djamena.¹⁵⁶ Cameroon and Chad established Operation Logone, composed of 2,500 soldiers from the Chadian Armed Forces for Intervention in Cameroon (FATIC) and units of the Cameroonian army.¹⁵⁷ Chadian soldiers stationed in Maltam, Fotokol and Mora, who enjoyed hot pursuit rights, carried out offensives against Boko Haram in Nigeria. They fought alongside the Cameroonians on their soil in several cases, like during the February 2015 Boko Haram attack on a military base in Fotokol.¹⁵⁸

Although there was no official agreement, the understanding between the two countries envisaged that Cameroon would provide the fuel, food supplies and medical care for the Chadians. The former defence minister had hoped for the intervention of the Chadian troops and the local population welcomed it – but it was challenged by the military hierarchy. Cameroonian soldiers are wary of them following allegations of abuses against civilians in Nigeria.¹⁵⁹ Having crossed into Cameroon through Kousseri in February 2015, Chadian troops left in November 2015.

¹⁵² The current MNJTF is a descendant of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) created by the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) in 1998 to fight banditry in the area – and which encompassed Nigeria, Chad and Niger. It has kept the same English name, MNJTF, but the legal framework has been modified, and the geographical scope and range of competences have been broadened to bring in Cameroon and Benin and cover the fight against Boko Haram.

¹⁵³ Crisis Group email correspondence, Nigerian and Cameroonian diplomats, July 2016. Crisis Group interviews, non-commissioned officers, Far North, March 2016. "Fotokol : quatre membres de Boko Haram abattus par l'armée nigériane", *L'œil du Sahel*, 29 April 2013.

¹⁵⁴ "L'armée camerounaise pilonne Boko Haram au Nigéria", *L'œil du Sahel*, 26 October 2015.

¹⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Cameroonian soldiers and diplomats, Yaoundé, March and June 2016.

¹⁵⁶ See Crisis Group Africa Report N°233, *Chad: Between Ambition and Fragility*, 30 March 2016.

¹⁵⁷ Crisis Group interviews, colonels and diplomats from the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), Yaoundé, March-June 2016.

¹⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, defence ministry spokesperson, Yaoundé, February 2016.

¹⁵⁹ Crisis Group interviews, senior officers, Yaoundé, January 2016; soldiers and administrative authorities, Yaoundé and Far North, 2016.

At the sub-regional level, the MNJTF has been organised into three sectors: Cameroon, Chad and Nigeria. The Cameroonian sector (Sector 1) covers Mayo Sava, although it is formally empowered to eventually cover all three border departments. Originally conceived as an integrated force, the MNJTF is in fact a coordinated force – the Cameroonian contingent is formed entirely of Cameroonian soldiers, and Cameroon’s defence ministry is entirely responsible for its funding and logistics. The commander of the Cameroonian sector takes his orders from the regional commander of the MNJTF in N’Djamena, but in the day-to-day management of Sector 1, he is answerable to the head of Emergence 4. The MNJTF has no authority over BIR-Alpha and Emergence 4, but these two forces do cooperate with the MNJTF contingent – with which they carry out joint operations in Nigeria.¹⁶⁰

The establishment of the MNJTF raised expectations among Cameroonian troops who hoped to be paid as if they were on a UN operation. This subsequently led to disappointment and accusations that salaries were being stolen.¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ Crisis Group interview, brigadier general, Maroua, March 2016. Wary at first, BIR-Alpha cooperates better with the MNJTF contingent, whose commander is the former national supervisor of the BIR and has co-opted about ten BIR officers into the MNJTF general staff in Mora.

¹⁶¹ Crisis Group interviews, MNJTF non-commissioned officers, Yaoundé and Mora, February-March 2016; MNJTF senior officer, N’Djamena, May 2016.

V. A Route out of Crisis

Although Boko Haram appears weakened this year – or at least has been described as weaker – it remains a danger for the populations in the Far North and a threat to the Cameroonian state and the security forces.¹⁶² Internal divisions undermining the group for a long time were exposed in August 2016 with Islamic State’s nomination of Abu Musab al-Barnawi as its new leader (Wali) in West Africa – a nomination challenged by Abubakar Shekau.¹⁶³ But the rift between Shekau and Barnawi does not imply that Boko Haram will cease its activities in Cameroon.¹⁶⁴ In fact, the opposite is true: there is a serious risk that Cameroon will see a worsening spiral of violence, particularly in the Lake Chad area – Hile Alifa, Darak and Makary – and in Mayo Sava, Mayo Tsanaga and along the Waza road, as the growing number of attacks since June 2016 indicates. After two years of conflict, it has become increasingly difficult for Boko Haram to attract recruits on an ideological basis in the Far North, which could lead the group to increase the scale of forced recruitment.¹⁶⁵

Across the Far North, the state is often present only in the form of the security forces and customs officers. Besides the specific technical or material issues, this also reflects a general problem of representation. The Cameroonian model for integrating peripheral regions by co-opting the male and elderly local elite has reached its limits – as in other regions – due to the poor management of resources and because the population is rising fast. This widening gulf between the way Cameroon is governed and the expectations of the public has exacerbated the social and economic vulnerability of young people in the region, leaving them exposed to the financial incentives proffered by Boko Haram.

Faced with development and social cohesion problems that the current conflict poses in the long term, the state should reinforce its presence in the region, concentrating on the improvement of public services and on the support and facilitation of economic activities. A visit by the president of Cameroon, and leaders of the opposition and civil society to the affected departments of the Far North could serve as the launchpad for a major drive to build public infrastructure and development projects. These should be accompanied by a program to reinforce social cohesion and inter-communal relations, as part of an inclusive approach that favours initiatives emerging from civil society and the public. The next 20 May National Day parade could take place in Maroua.

A. Social and Economic Priorities

The campaign against Boko Haram requires a strong social and economic dimension to counter the group’s recruitment efforts, and projects that will be launched need to be managed properly and in a transparent manner. The first priority must be the revival of trade with Nigeria, with permission granted for commercial vehicles to

¹⁶² Crisis Group Briefing, *Boko Haram on the Back Foot?*, op. cit.

¹⁶³ “Boko Haram : contesté, Aboubakar Shekau répond à nouveau à l’Etat islamique”, *Jeune Afrique*, 9 August 2016.

¹⁶⁴ The faction commanded by Shekau currently operates in the Mayo Sava and Mayo Tsanaga areas, while the one led by Abu Musab al-Barnawi operates throughout Logone and Chari and on Lake Chad islands. Crisis Group interviews, intelligence officers, Yaoundé, August 2016.

¹⁶⁵ “In the Tracks of Boko Haram in Cameroon”, op. cit.

resume journeys between Maiduguri and the Far North – and that will mean providing security escorts on dangerous routes. It is important to complete National Highway N°1 between Maroua and Kousseri, and to bring the road network up to standard, in order to better connect the Far North departments with the two other regions of northern Cameroon, given the substantial scale of local trade.

The second priority should be support for farming and fishing around Lake Chad, and on the fertile land of Mayo Danay, Mayo Kani and Mayo Tsanaga. This should be supplemented with the launch of labour-intensive projects to support local production of rice, millet and sorghum. The third priority should be the promotion of microcredit, targeting the Kanuri community among others – but access to credit should be conditional on enrolling children in school.

The fourth priority is to relaunch industry in the Far North and North by overhauling the way it is managed; Cameroon's external partners should also support public enterprises and small and medium businesses. This means that the state will need to increase Far North's share of the public investment budget and triennial emergency program. Partner countries and financial institutions should also step up their support for the Far North, because this region represents one sixth of Cameroon's population but is the least developed, and thus most at risk of being bogged down in a cycle of ongoing conflict.

On a social and cultural level, the state should rapidly increase and improve education and health services in the Far North and deploy incentives or even compulsion to encourage parents to overcome any social reservations and send their children to school; priority should be given to the most vulnerable communities. This should be complemented with support for local community radio stations and the extension of the reach of national Cameroonian broadcasters, with programs in Kanuri, Hausa, Fulfulde and Arab, to foster a sense of national inclusiveness and broadcast programs warning against religious radicalism in languages that local people can understand.

The state should also encourage and support displaced populations who wish to return and protect the properties of those who do not yet plan to go home, and do so in accordance with the parameters set out under the tripartite agreement between Cameroon, Nigeria and UNHCR.¹⁶⁶ Finally, units should be created to support former hostages and former members of Boko Haram.

To counteract religious radicalism, besides the measures already envisaged in the previous Crisis Group report on Cameroon, the social affairs ministry should encourage parents to lift the taboo surrounding Boko Haram by discussing the issue with their children. Following the example set by experiments with de-radicalisation programs in Nigerian prisons, and with the support of external partners and the consent of local communities, the Cameroonian government should provide programs, on a case-by-case basis, for those Boko Haram members who would like to reintegrate into society after serving a jail term appropriate to the seriousness of

¹⁶⁶ Village chiefs have announced that they would sell the possessions of displaced persons if they failed to return soon. Crisis Group interviews, displaced persons and administrative authorities, Kousseri, March 2016. The tripartite agreement envisages the gradual voluntary return of Nigerian refugees and makes the UNHCR and the Nigerian government jointly responsible for the security and socio-economic reintegration of former refugees. Crisis Group interviews, UNHCR and foreign ministry officials, Yaoundé, June-October 2016.

their crimes.¹⁶⁷ These programs should be open as a priority to Boko Haram members who were forcibly recruited and to deserters, while distinguishing between informers or those who provided small practical services and ideologists or leaders of the sect.

The security and judicial authorities should generally try to distinguish between Boko Haram members according to the gravity of the crimes they are accused of and the extent of their involvement in the group – even though it is not always easy to draw these distinctions – and to treat suspects and detainees fairly and in accordance with international law. A program of “restorative justice” could be envisaged; it would be based on confessions, work for the community, education about the dangers of religious radicalism and ideologies advocating violence, vocational training, socio-economic reintegration projects and, where necessary, short prison terms. It would be necessary to differentiate between forcibly recruited members, informers and those who provided minor practical assistance (forcibly recruited or not) but are not suspected of involvement in serious crimes such as torture, murder, forced disappearances etc. on the one hand, and leaders, ideologists and fighters who chose to join the movement, as well as all those suspected of committing serious abuses on the other. In order to do this, the current anti-terrorism law could be amended.

Finally, the state should continue to put in place programs to educate communities about the need to avoid stigmatising former Boko Haram members who have reintegrated into society; it should also reinforce trade between the Far North and southern Cameroon, and other types of exchanges, like cultural and sporting activities, that bring the two regions together. To implement all these measures, the government should allocate a significant share of the budget to the Far North.

B. Security Issues

In overall terms, Cameroon’s security response has been effective, thanks in part to the serious efforts undertaken since 2014 as well as improved coordination with neighbouring countries. But if the government is to restore lasting peace in the region, it needs to remedy a number of frailties in its approach and some strategic errors. Three aspects stand out.

The security forces, or any other state authority, should always be aware of the consequences that their actions may have for the populations and weigh up the risk that these will meet with rejection, undermine the legitimacy of the state, or generate intercommunal tensions. Greater respect for human rights will be crucial. And to achieve that, it is essential that soldiers and police guilty of abuses are subjected to disciplinary measures and that these measures are publicly announced.¹⁶⁸ That also means stepping up campaigns to inform the populations about security forces actions and taking their views into account.

¹⁶⁷ A de-radicalisation program for former members of Boko Haram in Nigeria has had limited results. “Road to Redemption? Unmaking Nigeria’s Boko Haram”, Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), 1 October 2015. There is no comparable program in Cameroon.

¹⁶⁸ Some gendarmes have been arrested for hold-ups in Mokolo. The gendarmerie has opened an investigation into this episode. Crisis Group interview, gendarmerie commander in the Far North, Maroua, March 2016. “Le Commandant de compagnie de Mokolo et deux gendarmes jetés en prison”, *L’œil du Sahel*, 31 August 2016.

Next, the government must ensure that the fight against Boko Haram neither generates potentially dangerous tensions within the security forces, nor that these assume a role that is incompatible with democracy. That involves taking special measures to ensure fairness in the pay and promotions of soldiers, particularly those deployed to the front. The technological modernisation of the Cameroonian army poses a question about the role it will play once the Boko Haram crisis is over. With 60,000 troops and henceforth well equipped, the army could be too large for peaceful times, while military equipment maintenance costs could have an impact on public investment. The government should plan a freeze on army recruitment for some time – except for those members of vigilante groups who meet the age and educational criteria – and then restart recruitment at a pre-war pace once budget resources permit.¹⁶⁹

As Boko Haram becomes weaker, the government should plan for the gradual return of police and gendarmerie to border areas – albeit in better-equipped units – to replace the elite military garrisons. These police should be trained to respect human rights in the specific context of rebellion, the fight against terrorism and operations among a traumatised population.

Finally, the vigilante groups have played an effective role in the fight against Boko Haram, but they pose a problem in the long term. They can lead to a privatisation of security, a slippage in standards or the excessive reinforcement of the powers of traditional chiefs – who exercise a degree of control over the committees. There is also a risk that some members facing economic problems could veer into criminality.¹⁷⁰ Thus, it is important to limit reliance on vigilante groups, and to plan for their gradual dissolution and the socio-economic reintegration of their members.

¹⁶⁹ Recruitment by the defence forces has sharply increased since the start of the conflict – by more than 10,000 extra soldiers in two years. The defence budget was previously devoted in a very large part to salary costs, but the sudden increase in manpower and spending to upgrade logistics and the conduct of the war itself are already generating deficits and a risk of budget crisis. This is one reason why Operation Alpha is currently funded by the presidency and unofficial funding arrangements and not by the defence ministry. Crisis Group interviews, senior officers, Yaoundé, Far North, 2016.

¹⁷⁰ “Cameroun : les comités de vigilance contre Boko Haram, de la défense à l’attaque”, *Le Monde*, 21 July 2016.

VI. Conclusion

The violence generated by Boko Haram in the Far North is a phenomenon unprecedented in Cameroon's recent history.¹⁷¹ While the risk of losing control of territory in the region was real, the response of the Cameroonian government, combined with intervention by the Chadian army and the reorganisation of the Nigerian army, brought a halt to the territorial expansion of the group – which suffered heavy losses and saw its conventional military capacity reduced. But the underlying problems that had left the Far North region particularly vulnerable persist: poverty, low school enrolment rates, social and generational divides, intercommunal tensions and the weak connection with the rest of the country. Moreover, despite its relative success at the most intense stage of the conflict, the army finds itself in a weak or even impotent position when confronted with low-intensity attacks and cross-border raids, cattle theft and everyday looting.

Over the long term, the Far North risks getting bogged down in a low-intensity conflict, fuelled by alliances of convenience between jihadists, traffickers and other opportunists in a Sahel that is prey to multiple conflicts. This would push back the chances of substantial development in the region and increase its vulnerability. It would also force the government to maintain a costly military deployment for a long period, which would jeopardise growth and development perspectives for the country, weakening it further.

Nairobi/Brussels, 16 November 2016

¹⁷¹ Aside from the decolonisation war between 1955 and 1971, which left tens of thousands dead, the conflict in the Far North has been the most costly in lives and destruction that Cameroon has ever experienced, ahead of the Bakassi conflict in which it clashed with Nigeria.

Appendix A: Map of Cameroon



Appendix B: Map of the Far North



Appendix C: Arrow Operations

Since the establishment of the Multinational Joint Task Force, BIR-Alpha and Emergence 4 have carried out operations in Nigeria under the legal authority of this force. External operations by BIR-Alpha go under the names “Arrow” and “Blue Pipe” and those of Emergence 4 as “Tentacles”. Arrow operations are conducted by the general staff and involve all the elements of BIR-Alpha. These are operations that take place more than ten kilometres inside the Nigerian frontier against targets that are rated as important. Blue Pipe operations are carried out within a five-kilometre range against smaller targets and are launched on the direct orders of BIR-Alpha sector commanders. Tentacles operations are carried out by the regular army and the Cameroonian contingent of the MNJTF. Eight Arrow operations were carried out between November 2015 and June 2016. Arrow 5 in Ngoshié and Arrow 6 in Kumshé were the most important because they succeeded in destroying two of the main training bases for suicide bombers and thus limiting the cycle of suicide attacks. All the external operations are carried out with the prior approval and often the participation of the Nigerian armed forces.

Table of Arrow operations

Arrow 1:	26-28 November 2015, target Mba.
Arrow 2:	2-3 December 2015, target Nbada Koura.
Arrow 3:	17 December 2015, target Djimini.
Arrow 4:	25 January 2016, target Ashigashia Nigeria.
Arrow 5:	11-14 February 2016, target Ngoshié, 162 Boko Haram members killed, according to the security forces.
Arrow 6:	24-25 February 2016, target Kumshé, 107 Boko Haram members killed, according to the security forces.
Arrow 7:	17-19 April 2016, target Diguime.
Arrow 8:	11 May 2016, target Madawaya forest.

Appendix D: Acronyms and Abbreviations

CAT	Anti-terrorism Centre
CPDM	Cameroon People's Democratic Movement
DGRE	General Directorate for External Research
ECCAS	Economic Community of Central African States
FATIC	Chadian armed forces for intervention in Cameroon
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IFRI	French Institute of International relations
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INS	National Institute of Statistics
IRIN	Integrated Regional Information Networks
LCBC	Lake Chad Basin Commission
MIB	Motorised Infantry Brigade
Minepat	Ministry of Economy, Planning and Regional Development
MNJTF	Multinational Joint Task Force
PIB	Public Investment Budget
REDHAC	Central Africa Human Rights Defenders Network
RG	Gendarmerie Region
RIB	Rapid Intervention Battalion
RMIA	Inter-service Military Region
UNDP	National Union for Democracy and Progress
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development

Appendix E: About the International Crisis Group

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November 2016

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