Legal Assistance for Southern Cameroonians detained in the context of the conflict in the Cameroons

Executive Summary

There are an estimated 3000 Southern Cameroonians detained by Government of Cameroun in the context of the conflict in the Southern Cameroons. While they are not yet officially designated as Prisoners of Conscience (PoCs) by Amnesty International, their trials at the hands of one of the most unfair and opaque judicial systems in the world have largely gone unnoticed and unreported. Southern Cameroonians are often arrested without any warrant. They are usually held incommunicado for long periods of time while they undergo interrogation and torture. Many are maimed and some summarily executed and their bodies disposed of by the authorities. To Increase the odds of survival for those arrested, the first few days after arrest are extremely critical. A team of committed common law lawyers have been working diligently over the past 3 years to track down the locations of those arrested, trace their whereabouts and to raise an alarm to ensure that they are not permanently disappeared. For those that eventually get sent to one of the many prisons, their cases are usually sent before a military tribunal where they are usually subjected to questioning without the presence of counsel by an examining magistrate where trumped up terrorism charges are levied against them. Many spend years in prison, before a case is brought against them and some even die without ever being charged. For those that have been charged to court, the process is even worse, some have gone to court as many as 50 times without their cases being heard. This happens on a monthly basis, in a ritual of postponement without explanations or any opportunity to ask questions. When trials are finally conducted, they are sham events, held entirely in French language, in front of a panel of all french speaking magistrates, and by prosecutors and witnesses who only speak French and often without translators present. A team of common law lawyers have been put together to represent these unfortunate detainees. They travel to the various prisons, tribunals and courts to represent detainees, provide counsel,file briefs and appeals and follow up with the courts to ensure that their cases are heard and that, where possible, translators/interpreters are brought in, so that some semblance of due process is followed. They also travel to various detention facilities to track down missing detainees to ensure that they are not permanently disappeared. While they have agreed to provide their services on a pro bono basis, financial resources are required to support their travel, accommodation and feeding while they are on the road, often for days at a time, to provide this invaluable service. VRF is working to raise $7500 to provide an estimated 4 months of logistical support for the 17 lawyers who have volunteered to act as counsel.

Background on the Conflict in the Cameroons

The conflict in the Cameroons is one of the few major conflicts in the world today where, officially, there are no Prisoners of War (POWs) on either side. The implication is that everyone in the battlefield either escapes or all who are captured are killed. The conflict escalated in 2017

when protests by minority english speaking Southern Cameroonians in the Cameroons were brutally suppressed by the majority french speaking Government of Cameroun. In response to widely publicized mass arrests, maimings, torture, incarceration and enforced disappearances by Cameroun authorities of protesters, the population rose up in a mass rebellion. In November 2017, the Government of Cameroun declared war on the english-speaking minority population and numerous self-defense groups sprung up to confront Cameroun's security forces that had been deployed to quell the rebellion. In the 4 years since the conflict escalated, the belligerents have grown very accustomed to automatically killing their opponents, in clear violation of international law governing such conflicts. The gruesome killings are often photographed or captured on video by their assailants and the images circulated on social media with a great degree of abandon. It is estimated that, in the 4 years since the conflict escalated in 2017, 12,500 people have been killed, 350 villages burnt down and more than 700,000 people displaced, all in the English speaking Southern Cameroons. Numerous calls by the international community for a cessation of hostilities and holding of Inclusive Dialogue to resolve the Root Causes of the Conflict have not borne any fruits.

In January 2021, the United States senate passed Resolution 684 calling for an end to the violence. Like many other calls before that, the resolution has gone unheeded and the violence has instead intensified with increasingly more arrests, even more audacious attacks and markedly more deaths, especially of civilians. The focus on the fighting has meant that the plight of the majority of people arrested and detained in the context of the conflict has been neglected or forgotten.

A Proliferation of Detention Facilities

The Government of Cameroun operates major prisons in Buea, Bamenda, Douala, Bafoussam, Dschang, Kumba, Edea, Mfou, Yoko, Mbalmayo and Yaounde where prisoners arrested in the context of the Southern Cameroons conflict are detained. Outside of the prison system, the Government of Cameroun operates a large number of detention facilities, both legal and illegal, some publicized and many hidden. There are detention facilities operated by the military including in their camps and barracks, at SEMIL and even in the Ministry of Defense complex itself and the Police Headquarters. There are those operated by the Secret Service (CENER/SCRJ/DGRE/SEDOC/SEMIL) in the regions as well as the dreaded DGRE in Yaounde. Even the Presidential Guard runs special Detention facilities in the regions where they're deployed. Other facilities are operated by the Gendarmerie in their various Commands with the largest holding facility being at their notorious SED Headquarters in Yaounde. Still other detention facilities are operated by the police in all regions and at its central holding facility in Yaounde known as Judicial Police.

Work of Lawyers

On practically a weekly basis, and sometimes multiple times in a single week, teams of common law lawyers from all across Southern Cameroons travel to the courts in all the various major towns to represent Southern Cameroonians detained in the various Prisons and other Detention

facilities. They face a daunting task. Many of the cases are often postponed without any explanations. On a few occasions, when cases are heard, the proceedings are conducted entirely in French language, using French Civil Laws and often without interpreters. With the judges and their accessors all French speaking as well as prosecutors and witnesses they bring, the odds are heavily stacked against detainees. Judgements are often arbitrary, and handed out without any deliberations. The presence of the common law lawyers represent the glimmer of hope that these detainees, many of whom do not understand a word of French, have at receiving justice. These detainees are already presumed guilty even though they are remanded in custody awaiting trial. They are not allowed Bail and for some others, visitors and lawyers require special passes or permits in order to see them, and these permits must be paid for before they are issued in a complicated process by the Government Department in charge.
In addition to acting as counsel for detainees, the team of lawyers also scours the various detention facilities in search for missing Southern Cameroonians, most of whom are picked up secretly and whisked away to these facilities far away from their homes without families having any knowledge of their whereabouts.

The need for funds

A team of 17 lawyers have volunteered their services to represent the detained Southern Cameroonians and also help search for missing persons who have been reportedly picked up by the Government of Cameroun Security Services. On a monthly basis, these lawyers make an average of 20 trips to the various courts, prisons and detention centres, file and pay for Appeals and other proceedings, and incur many other expenses relating to accommodation out of station, printing, phone calls and other logistics. We are raising $7,500 initially to provide approximately 3.5 months of logistics support for the 17 lawyers to carry out their ongoing work.

Sample Project Expenditures

The cost estimates are based on historical data on weekly cases being presented in the different courts and the number of lawyers traveling to represent detainees. It is customary for multiple lawyers to be present in court to argue the cases put forward by the prosecution, challenge the witnesses and prepare and file Appeals. The table below shows Cost Estimates for logistics associated with providing the necessary representation for the detainees. For instance, with 3 lawyers living in Kumba and travelling to courts in Kumba and Buea, on average, two lawyers will be present in court each week either in Buea or Kumba. With $50 budgeted per lawyer to cover all costs per Trip, $100 is budget per court session. For the four sessions each month, the budget for lawyers travelling from Kumba is estimated at $400. Similar computations have been made for lawyers in Bamenda, Victoria and Yaounde.

Location of Lawyers	Number of Lawyers	Destination of travels	Estimated Number of monthly trips	Estimated Average cost per Trip (USD)	Total Cost estimates (USD)
Kumba	3	Buea & Kumba	4	100	400
Victoria	3	Buea & Douala	4	125	500
Bamenda	5	Bamenda, Douala, Yaounde	6	150	600
Yaounde	6	Yaounde	4	90	360
Total					**1,860**