



Curbing Feuds over Water in Cameroon's Far North

Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°197

Yaoundé/Brussels, 25 April 2024

What's new? Cameroon's Far North, the country's poorest region, is experiencing recurrent inter-communal frictions over water reserves. As national and local authorities try to contain fighting between Choa Arab herders and Musgum fisherfolk, other ethnic groups are at risk of being drawn into a conflict that has displaced tens of thousands.

Why did it happen? The Far North is grappling with militant raids, as well as deep grievances triggered by poor governance and increasing food scarcity. Erratic rainfall due to climate change has intensified competition between ethnic groups over water and land.

Why does it matter? Cameroon can ill afford a new cycle of inter-communal violence in the remote but densely populated Far North, which lies in the Sahel belt. Its forces are overstretched fighting insurgents elsewhere in the country.

What should be done? To help resolve tensions before they escalate, authorities should increase the number of early warning committees in the Far North and strengthen preparedness for climate shocks. They should make water and land management more inclusive and ensure that the region's people have access to better justice services.

I. Overview

The spectre of deadly fighting between Choa Arab and Musgum groups hangs over Cameroon's Far North, due in part to competition over water and land. A dispute over the Logone River waters sparked a round of conflict in 2021, reviving years of bitter political rivalry in a region battered by the Islamist insurgency Boko Haram, drought and flooding. The government has tried to prevent the Choa Arab-Musgum tensions from spilling over, but with only partial success. Between 2021 and 2023, a dozen other clashes linked to resources temporarily displaced some 15,000 people of other ethnicities in the area. As the war with jihadists and the fighting in Cameroon's Anglophone regions are taxing government forces, Yaoundé would likely struggle to contain a new wave of violence. With donor support, it should strengthen early warning mechanisms for conflict and rainfall, as well as reform water and land governance to improve public access and ensure fairer dispute resolution. It should also incorporate climate security measures in its reconstruction program for the Far North.

The Choa Arab-Musgum conflict is rooted in longstanding grievances. Many Musgum are fishers and farmers who often dig basins on the floodplains of the Logone River to retain fish and water, which they use to irrigate their fields; meanwhile, many Choa Arabs are cattle owners. Cows sometimes get trapped in the marshy canals, suffering injury or death. Both groups fear their livelihoods are under threat: the Musgum want to keep digging basins while the Choa Arabs want the practice stopped. This disagreement has escalated into a broader ethnic feud. Musgum and other sedentary groups complain that administrators favour Choa Arabs in disputes about water, land and chieftaincies. At the same time, changing rainfall patterns are harming land across the Far North, with recurring droughts and floods diminishing soil fertility. As a result, farmers are harvesting fewer crops and communities are struggling to find enough potable water. Many residents are wary of existing judicial and governance systems, sometimes leading them to try resolving resource disputes through violence.

The Cameroonian government has striven to contain the Choa Arab-Musgum conflict, deploying security forces to prevent other communities – Kotoko, Massa, Fulani, Kanuri and Sara – from getting drawn into the clashes. Cameroon has also worked with Chad to monitor developments along the Logone River, whose waters the two countries share. Yaoundé has allowed humanitarian organisations to set up camps for displaced people in Maroua and Bogo in the Logone-et-Chari division. The government has also discouraged further violence by arresting troublemakers, imposing curfews and convening political, religious and traditional elites for talks.

Despite these efforts, the risk of inter-communal violence in the region remains high. Clashes between Choa Arabs and Musgum resumed in November 2023, while tensions are rising among other groups in the Mayo-Sava, Mayo-Tsanaga, Mayo-Danay and Diamare divisions of the Far North. The Boko Haram and Islamic State in West Africa Province jihadist insurgencies could also inflame tensions. Officials are concerned that local people could use the jihadists' trafficking networks to buy small arms, driving further violence. These insurgencies also continue to encroach upon lands used for farming, fishing and herding, rendering many areas unsafe. Thousands of displaced people are now forced to compete over the same water and pasture in northern Cameroon and Nigeria's Borno state.

To find solutions, the authorities need to address the conflict's roots, improving access to water and land. While ethnic tensions have long plagued the region, the poor management of water and land exacerbated by climate stresses has made matters worse. The immediate priority for Cameroon should be to bolster its existing early warning mechanisms, such as local crisis committees created after the 2021 clashes and weather forecasts prepared by the National Climate Change Observatory. In the medium term, local and national authorities should ensure that their ambitious development plans for the region are environment-, climate- and conflict-sensitive. In particular, they should establish a system for managing water points that includes representatives of all ethnic groups, as well as women and young people. They should also seek to boost citizens' trust in the justice system and create a fund to provide individual or community-based compensation for victims of clashes.

II. The Choa Arabs and Musgum: The Casus Belli

The Far North is one of Cameroon's most populous and least developed regions, with more than three million inhabitants and a poverty rate exceeding 74 per cent.¹ Despite the hardships its citizens face, the region is politically important to President Paul Biya because of its large voting-age population and its unwavering support for the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement.²

Sedentary, nomadic and semi-nomadic groups have lived side by side in the Far North for centuries, but not without friction. Inter-communal relations are often strained, with some disputes dating back decades.³ Ties to kin in neighbouring Nigeria and Chad tend to foster a strong sense of ethnic loyalty straddling national borders, frequently raising the stakes of local flare-ups when they erupt.⁴ Conflict broke out between the Choa Arabs and the Kotoko (often supported by the Musgum) in the 1970s and 1980s, while in the early 1990s they fought for political dominance during Cameroon's transition to competitive electoral democracy.⁵

The Far North is situated in the Sahel, where temperatures are rising one and a half times faster than the global average, according to the UN.⁶ Experts say the Far North, like the rest of the Sahel, is highly vulnerable to weather shocks.⁷ The climate in the Logone-et-Chari division at the region's northernmost tip is particularly harsh. The division's capital, Kousseri, is on average the hottest city in Cameroon.⁸ During the dry season, which typically runs from October through June, temperatures peak at around 40°C and evapotranspiration – the loss of water from both the soil surface

¹ The National Institute of Statistics estimates that poverty rate in the Far North is almost double the national average of 37 per cent. In 2014, 35 per cent of Cameroon's 8 million poor lived in the Far North. Poverty in the region has progressively worsened from 56.3 per cent in 2001 to 65.9 in 2007 and 74.3 in 2014. In 2019, the World Bank estimated the poverty rate in the Far North at 77 per cent. "Les régions septentrionales présentées comme les plus pauvres du Cameroun", *Actu Cameroun*, 6 August 2019.

² The Far North long had the largest number of registered voters in the country until it was surpassed by the Centre region in 2018. "Géo-analyse des résultats de l'élection présidentielle du 7 octobre 2018 au Cameroun", Geomatic Strategy, January-February 2019. In 2018, Biya visited Maroua to deliver a speech to a live audience – his only in-person appearance during that year's electoral campaign. In the 2020 municipal elections, the ruling party won all ten councils in the Logone-et-Chari division.

³ Between 1984 and 2014, for example, the Mafa of the Mayo-Tsanaga division along the Nigerian border clashed several times with the Tupuri of the Mayo-Danay division next to Chad over control of a market.

⁴ Crisis Group interviews, NGO staff, academic and journalists, Maroua, August 2023. See also Robi Layio, "La solidarité ethnique à l'épreuve des conflits communautaires à Blangoua dans la région du lac Tchad", in Mouadjamou Ahmadou, Bjørn Arntsen and Warayanssa Mawoune (eds.), *Vivre au Nord-Cameroun : Enjeux, défis et stratégies* (Québec, 2023), pp. 49-71.

⁵ The Choa Arabs tried to capitalise on their greater numbers to control the local council and National Assembly policies regarding the Logone-et-Chari division. The Kotoko accused the Choa Arabs of distributing voter cards to ethnic kin in Nigeria and Chad to increase their vote share. Crisis Group interviews, University of Maroua lecturer, Maroua, August 2023.

⁶ Xavier Bourgois, "Dwindling rains in northern Cameroon spark conflict and displacement", UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), November 2021.

⁷ Heat waves in 2021 and 2022 made those years the hottest on record in Cameroon. Crisis Group interviews, National Climate Change Observatory officials, Yaoundé, October 2023.

⁸ Crisis Group interviews, climate specialists, civil society members and environmental lawyer, Yaoundé, October 2023.

and plants, a process that hurts agricultural productivity – increases.⁹ High temperatures along with erratic rains shrink water available for fishing communities and pasture for herders.¹⁰ In 2021, a severe drought made conditions even more difficult than usual.¹¹ The rainy season typically lasts three to five months, bringing precipitation that replenishes the soil but also an increasing number of downpours that cause devastating floods.

A. *Drowned Cattle and the 2021 Clashes*

The Choa Arab-Musgum conflict illustrates how climate stress can heighten inter-communal tensions. During the dry season, Musgum fisherfolk in the Logone-et-Chari division often dig large basins on the floodplains of the Logone River, a low-cost albeit labour-intensive way to retain water and fish.¹² As the dry seasons get hotter and drier, they are digging more of these basins, which can be hazardous to cows. In August 2021, a Choa Arab herder's cow drowned after getting stuck in one such basin dug by a Musgum.¹³ Incensed Choa Arabs in the town of Logone-Birni gave the local Musgum an ultimatum to fill the basins with soil to prevent other cattle from stumbling into them. When the Musgum refused, the Choa Arabs attacked.

The skirmish rapidly degenerated into a series of retaliatory assaults. The violence spread throughout the Logone-et-Chari division, including Kousseri, where the Logone River cuts a natural border with the Chadian capital, N'Djamena. The nearby Mayo-Danay division also saw fighting between Choa Arabs and Musgum.¹⁴ The two sides attacked each other's villages, using knives, bows and locally manufactured guns.¹⁵ In some instances, they also sexually assaulted or killed women as a form of collective punishment before setting houses ablaze.¹⁶

Although men perpetrated the violence, women played a role in the conflict at times. Locals told Crisis Group that a small number of Musgum women gathered intelligence during the clashes.¹⁷ Some women told Crisis Group that they tried to dissuade men from fighting.¹⁸ Several women moved entire families in canoes across the Logone River to safety in Chad, helping to evacuate an estimated 11,000 people, mostly women and children.¹⁹

⁹ During evapotranspiration, the soil's surface loses water to the atmosphere through evaporation, while plants and crops lose water through transpiration.

¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, climate specialists, civil society members and environmental lawyer, Yaoundé, October 2023.

¹¹ The Far North's rainfall was below the 1990-2020 average in 2021. The region received more rain than average the next year. Data from the Climate Hazards Group InfraRed Precipitation with Station Data from the Climate Hazards Center.

¹² These basins are locally known as *canaux de pêche* or "fishing canals" in French.

¹³ Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian workers, academics, journalists, displaced men and women, Maroua and Kousseri, August-October 2023.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, academic and humanitarian staff, Maroua, August 2023.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, displaced women, Bogo and Kousseri, August and October 2023.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, academic and humanitarian staff, Maroua, August 2023.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, women's group members, Kousseri, October 2023.

¹⁹ Several women drowned trying to swim across the river, whose banks had overflowed during the August rains. Crisis Group interviews, displaced women, Maroua, Bogo and Kousseri, August-October

As August's violence subsided, local authorities imposed a general curfew and banned gatherings of more than ten people. But the two communities were already planning their next moves, while taking steps to protect the most vulnerable from future attack.²⁰ For example, Musgum evacuated additional groups of women and children across the Logone River to stay with kin in Chad.²¹ Both ethnic groups also used the river to smuggle weapons and ammunition from Chad as men from elsewhere in the region travelled to Logone-et-Chari division to swell the fighters' ranks.²² The two sides came to blows again in September and December.

Local authorities took several measures to curb the violence. In December, administrators banned boat traffic on the river. In Kousseri, officials set up a twenty-member crisis committee comprising Choa Arab and Musgum representatives – ten members of each group – to organise an open dialogue. The committee struggled to make progress, however, as fresh fighting broke out in town just days after an early December reconciliation meeting.²³

According to the authorities, around 100 people died in the inter-communal clashes between August and December 2021. But residents told Crisis Group that this figure is probably an undercount, given how much destruction occurred and how long it took for security forces to arrive to calm tempers. In addition, eyewitnesses say scores of men, women and children drowned trying to swim across the Logone River. These deaths are likely not included in the official toll.

In total, about 100,000 people, mainly women and children, fled the violence, creating humanitarian emergencies in Cameroon and Chad. The authorities in N'Djamena were first to raise the alarm. In December 2021, President Mahamat Déby Itno said Chad had taken in nearly 30,000 Cameroonians.²⁴ The refugee influx prompted Déby to post guards along the Logone River and to block local Choa Arabs and Musgum from sending weapons to Cameroon.²⁵

Yaoundé had kept silent until then, likely because acknowledging the violence might have undermined the government's preferred narrative of peace and stability

2023. "Des affrontements intercommunautaires au Cameroun forcent 11,000 personnes à fuir au Tchad", press release, UNHCR, 21 August 2021.

²⁰ Crisis Group interviews, UN staff and local administrator, Kousseri, October 2023.

²¹ Crisis Group interviews, Musgum women, Kousseri, October 2023.

²² In September 2021, the authorities in Maroua arrested a Musgum man who had travelled from Yaoundé with weapons to join the fighting. Authorities in Cameroon and Chad intercepted several other would-be combatants before they reached Logone-et-Chari, but a small number managed to get through. Crisis Group interviews, local administrator, academic and herders' association member, Maroua and Kousseri, August-October 2023.

²³ Tensions were high at the government-convened meetings, as communal representatives seemed reluctant to make serious commitments. Many feared they would not have the support of their angry communities for concessions. They also suspected that the government was simply trying to impose an end to hostilities without addressing grievances. Crisis Group interviews, women peace activists at water security workshop, Yaoundé, October 2023. See also "North Cameroon violence between farmers, herders kills 22; residents flee", Reuters, 9 December 2021.

²⁴ Déby took to social media to chastise the outside world for failing to respond to the unfolding humanitarian crisis. Post on X by General Mahamat Idris Deby Itno, @GmahamatIdi, 4:22pm, 8 December 2021.

²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, government officials and UN staff, Kousseri, October 2023.

in the Far North.²⁶ Regional officials toured the Logone-Birni area a few days after the clashes subsided, while security forces deployed in more than a hundred villages in the area. Despite their small numbers and the flooded terrain, troops managed to disperse most fighters and arrest hundreds, mostly men.²⁷ The troops held the detainees in Kousseri, sending around 100 of them to the regional capital Maroua toward the end of the year in a bid to prevent jailbreaks and marches outside the prison as both Choa Arabs and Musgum took to the streets. New violent protests erupted in Kousseri in December 2021, with Musgum demonstrators demanding the detainees' release, arguing that members of their ethnic group had been the main targets of the roundups.²⁸ In January 2022, troops quashed similar angry protests in Kousseri by Choa Arabs in support of a former mayor in the region, Acheick Aboukresse, who had been arrested.²⁹

The authorities allowed humanitarian agencies to establish camps for some 15,000 displaced people in Maroua and Bogo in the Diamare division, away from the main conflict zone and guarded by unarmed vigilantes.³⁰ (The camps are still in place today.) The UN refugee agency and foreign non-governmental organisations obtained emergency funding to distribute food aid and other items, such as hygiene and sanitation kits, in displacement camps in Cameroon and Chad. But most needs have remained unmet.³¹ There are reports of young Choa Arab girls fending for themselves on the streets of Maroua, where they are vulnerable to sexual violence and trafficking.³² Both communities harbour suspicions that culprits in violence on the other side have benefitted from impunity.³³

²⁶ Crisis Group interviews, civil society staff, Maroua, August 2023; woman leader, Yaoundé, October 2023.

²⁷ Local officials claimed that the government dispatched fewer than 300 troops for this operation. Crisis Group interviews, administrator and aid workers, Maroua and Kousseri, August-October 2023.

²⁸ "North Cameroon violence between farmers, herders kills 22; residents flee", op. cit. Most of those detained in Kousseri were sentenced to prison for looting and selling goods stolen from shops. Security forces arrested a small number of women found with goods that their husbands had stolen during the December 2021 fighting in Kousseri. Musgum people complained of bias, saying the authorities had mostly arrested Musgum men. Local officials did not deny it, saying the Musgum had looted Choa Arab shops during the protests, angered by their apparent monopoly on the food and clothing trade. Crisis Group interviews, Kousseri, October 2023.

²⁹ Acheick Aboukresse is a former mayor of Makary in the Logone-et-Chari division. He was arrested and transferred to Maroua on suspicion of involvement in the 2021 clashes. "Cameroun – Extrême-Nord : Les affrontements entre l'armée camerounaise et des Arabes Choas à Kousseri font un mort et un blessé", CamerounInfoNet, 12 January 2022.

³⁰ Vigilantes drawn from among the displaced guard the Maroua and Bogo camps. They report any increase in tensions, as well as the movements of other ethnic groups, to the authorities. Crisis Group interviews, displaced women and men, and NGO workers, Maroua and Bogo, August 2023.

³¹ In February 2022, the UN Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) launched an emergency appeal for \$100 million to support 100,000 people displaced by the Choa Arab-Musgum conflict and residents of the areas in Cameroon and Chad where they have sought shelter.

³² Crisis Group interviews, women and men NGO staff, Maroua, August 2023.

³³ Ibid.

Aid agencies have also been slow to account for the Choa Arab-Musgum conflict in their regional programming.³⁴ Only in 2023 did the UN Peacebuilding Fund help Cameroon's justice ministry and local authorities form early warning committees (*comités villageois d'alerte et concertation*, in French) out of revived traditional courts. The purpose of these committees is to monitor tensions within communities, resolve disputes and report threats of violence to administrative and security officials. In November 2023, these committees helped avert a new cycle of violence by tipping off the army that it should dispatch patrols to areas where tensions were brewing.³⁵ But there are too few of them. Thus far, committees have been set up in just ten of the approximately one hundred villages where the 2021 fighting took place, mainly in the Logone-Birni sub-division.³⁶ UN officials pressed local administrators to include women in these committees, but of 167 members in the ten villages, only 23 are women.³⁷

B. *Sporadic Clashes and Continuing Tensions*

Since 2022, an uneasy calm punctuated by outbursts of violence has settled in the Logone-et-Chari division. The Choa Arab and Musgum communities are increasingly segregated from one another, and when tensions arise over access to resources, they escalate quickly.

Data show that twelve of eighteen communal conflicts in the Far North between January 2022 and November 2023 were directly related to water, land or both.³⁸ For example, on 16 September 2022, Kirdi farmers clashed with Fulani herders in Adakele, Mora town (Mayo-Sava division) after weeks of disputes over grazing and agricultural land, with the two sides destroying each other's property. On 22 July 2023, Christian and Muslim groups fought over land in Warba village, Tokombere town, Mayo-Sava, leaving four men dead and displacing about 4,500 people.³⁹ On 11 August 2023, residents of Doukouroye and Silla in Kai Kai, a commune in Mayo-Danay division, came to blows over ownership of a rice farm, resulting in four deaths.⁴⁰ On 19 September 2023, Choa Arabs from Malia and Kanuri from Ndiguina also battled over farmland in Waza.⁴¹

³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian staff, Maroua and Kousseri, August-October 2023. See also "Le HCR 'profondément' préoccupé par la reprise des affrontements intercommunautaires dans l'Extrême-Nord", *StopBlaBlaCam*, 10 December 2021.

³⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, woman humanitarian worker in Maroua, February 2024.

³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian officials, Kousseri, October 2023.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ The security forces intervened to stop about half the reported communal conflicts. The number of fatalities in these clashes ranged from one to four, according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project.

³⁹ The clashes pitted Christians against Muslims, but the issue dividing them was material: both sides were supporting relatives who had staked claims to the same piece of land. Crisis Group interview, civil society worker, Maroua, August 2023. The 4,500 displaced people were spread across fifteen towns in the Mayo-Sava division.

⁴⁰ Gendarmes were surprised by the scale of the fighting. Some residents blamed the clashes on local traditional and administrative authorities, who had made conflicting decisions about land ownership. Crisis Group interviews, journalists and NGO staff, including women and displaced women, Maroua and Kousseri, August and October 2023.

⁴¹ The fighting in Waza killed one person and injured at least twelve.

Many residents worry that a fresh cycle of violence might draw in ethnic groups that have remained on the sidelines of the Choa Arab-Musgum conflict.⁴² Some communities lean toward the Musgum and others toward the Choa Arabs. The Kotoko, for example, are mostly sedentary, like the Musgum, with whom they have social and cultural ties; the Fulani, who are typically herders, feel closer to the Choa Arabs. Some semi-nomadic Fulani considered backing the Choa Arabs in the 2021 conflict but decided against joining them because the villages where fighting took place were difficult to get to.⁴³ On 6 October 2023, Kotoko and Choa Arabs clashed in Makary, Logone-et-Chari. After the incident, Choa Arab leaders reportedly met in the nearby town of Goulfey to organise reprisals against the Musgum and Kotoko.⁴⁴ The government managed to ward off a confrontation by sending soldiers to five towns where inter-communal tensions were high.⁴⁵

Authorities are dutifully monitoring the situation, but so far, they have done little to address the underlying problems, and people are still living in fear. The government has encouraged peacebuilding through talks among traditional and religious leaders. The dialogues usually exclude women and youth leaders, whether or not they or their families have been victims in the clashes, as well as the perpetrators of violence. These initiatives have generally fizzled out. After a peace tour by members of the region's elite in August 2021, violence kicked off again the following month.⁴⁶ In another instance, local administrators cancelled a May 2023 peace meeting called by the speaker of the National Assembly, who is from the Far North, fearing it would rile the population.⁴⁷ In June 2023, several young Musgum left a work site in the village of Arkis, near Kousseri, where a project led by the French development agency employed 150 young people, over concerns for their safety in this predominantly Choa Arab locality.⁴⁸

Efforts by traditional and religious leaders encouraging the displaced to return have likewise gone largely unheeded.⁴⁹ The number of displaced people fluctuates as tensions ebb and flow, while reliable figures are hard to come by, given that aid agencies lack the capacity to keep track of inter-communal conflict. Still, many displaced in towns like Maroua and Kousseri told Crisis Group that they have little to go back to. Several Choa Arabs said they are still recovering from the trauma of losing family members, land and livestock. Other displaced people said they worry about fresh violence in their hometowns. Yet others are seeking clarity about land ownership before considering returning.⁵⁰ Those who have returned now stay primarily among

⁴² Crisis Group interviews, cattle herder association member and NGO staff, Maroua, August 2023.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, woman NGO staffer, November 2023.

⁴⁵ Soldiers went to Kousseri, Logone-Birni, Goulfey and Makary.

⁴⁶ "Mousgoum et Arab Choa ont fait la paix", *Cameroon Tribune*, 20 August 2021.

⁴⁷ "Mousgoum-Arabe Choas : L'offre de Cavaye Yeguié rejetée par les deux communautés", *Actu Cameroun*, 2 June 2023. Cavaye is from the Mada ethnic group, which is dominant in Tokombere, Mayo-Sava division. He has been speaker since 1992.

⁴⁸ "Microprojets de développement : Arabes Choa et Mousgoums se regardent en chien de faïence dans le Logone-et-Chari", *StopBlaBlaCam*, 19 June 2023.

⁴⁹ Cameroonian officials visited displacement camps in Chad, urging people there to go home. Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian staff and local administrator, Kousseri, October 2023.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, displaced people, Bogo and Kousseri, August-October 2023.

their own kin, whereas before the clashes there was more interaction between the two communities.⁵¹ Genuine civic life has crumbled in the hardest-hit towns.

III. The Far North's Vulnerabilities

More people in the Far North depend on farming, fishing or herding for their livelihoods than in any other part of Cameroon, making the region particularly vulnerable to fighting that pushes people away from fields, streams and pastures. In the past decade, food insecurity has climbed significantly due to attacks by Boko Haram and then splinter groups. More than 80 per cent of the 700,000 people in the Far North who were displaced as of February 2023 fled due to jihadist violence.⁵² The insurgency thus worsened the region's already vast economic problems.⁵³ At the same time, the Far North suffers more droughts and deadly floods than anywhere else in the country. A mix of these and other climate concerns – unpredictable rainfall and uncertainty about the planting season – has reduced access to potable water and diminished food reserves.⁵⁴ Of the 3.5 million people facing acute food insecurity in Cameroon in 2023, nearly 1.6 million resided in the Far North, a 33 per cent increase from 2022.⁵⁵ All these factors contribute to fears that renewed inter-communal clashes could aggravate the humanitarian crisis.

A. The Boko Haram Threat

Boko Haram first attacked Cameroon in March 2014, but the group had sent members into the Far North at least three years earlier.⁵⁶ Historical neglect by the state and cultural similarities with north-eastern Nigeria, where the insurgency first emerged,

⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, humanitarian official, Kousseri, October 2023.

⁵² "Matrice de Suivi des Déplacements, République Du Cameroun, (Extrême-Nord), round 27, August 2023", International Organization for Migration, October 2023. The 700,000 figure includes 453,661 internally displaced people, 198,940 returnees (to their towns of origin or a place they had fled earlier) and 49,165 foreign refugees but not the 76,000 Nigerians living in Minawao camp.

⁵³ Between 2018 and 2022, Cameroon's maternal mortality rate fell from 4,000 deaths per 100,000 women to 2,000 after a UN Population Fund (UNFPA) intervention supporting thousands of health facility-assisted births and access to reproductive health services in the five most affected regions, including the Far North. The program was underwritten by the Islamic Development Bank. "Annual Report 2022, Cameroon", UNFPA, 2022. According to a 2021 study, 70 per cent of households in the Far North cannot afford a nutritious diet, as compared to 48 per cent in Cameroon as a whole. "Fill the Nutrient Gap, Cameroon", World Food Programme, October 2021.

⁵⁴ "Dwindling rains in northern Cameroon spark conflict and displacement", op. cit. "Climate change fuels clashes in Cameroon that force thousands to flee", UNHCR, 9 September 2021.

⁵⁵ Three of the six administrative divisions most affected by acute food insecurity in Cameroon are in the Far North. They are Logone-et-Chari, Mayo-Sava and Mayo-Tsanaga. UN OCHA Situation Report, 2 October 2023.

⁵⁶ For more on the jihadist groups, see, eg, Crisis Group Africa Reports N°241, *Cameroon: Confronting Boko Haram*, 16 November 2016; and N°273, *Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province*, 16 May 2019. Boko Haram has split, with one major faction adopting the name Islamic State West Africa Province and another keeping the original group's preferred moniker Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS). See Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°196, *JAS vs. ISWAP: The War of the Boko Haram Splinters*, 28 March 2024. For simplicity's sake, this briefing will refer to JAS as Boko Haram.

made the Far North vulnerable to jihadist infiltration, as did the region's smuggling networks, highway banditry and crime of all kinds, particularly in border zones. Militants also used footholds in Chad and Niger to recruit in those countries, appealing to ethnic, commercial and religious ties, while exploiting inter-communal tensions along the frontiers where they operated.

Boko Haram's first attacks in Cameroon were mostly small-scale, if often deadly, targeting army checkpoints and patrols, as well as public roads, schools and markets. At times, the group deployed young girls it had abducted as suicide bombers. Starting in 2014, the four Lake Chad countries – Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria – all sent troops to the affected areas under the banner of the Multinational Joint Task Force.⁵⁷ Yaoundé also sent extra soldiers to the Far North, while local authorities imposed curfews and mounted sting operations to find suspected militants. Although the epicentre of Boko Haram violence remained in Nigeria, the number of raids in the Far North rose steeply between 2015 and 2017 before tapering off due to these security measures and the group's changing tactics. Overall, attacks by Boko Haram and, later, its breakaway faction Islamic State West Africa Province have caused thousands to flee their homes in the Far North, with deleterious effects on education and health care in the region.⁵⁸

Today, militants raid the Far North primarily to steal food, supplies and other necessities. Particularly around Lake Chad, jihadist incursions have made many farmlands, fishing areas and pastures dangerous for locals, with combatants carrying out hit-and-run attacks in the Mayo-Tsanaga, Logone-et-Chari and Mayo-Sava divisions.⁵⁹ The deadliest incident to date occurred in June 2019, when militants killed twenty soldiers and sixteen civilians, mostly fisherfolk, on Darak island in Logone-et-Chari.⁶⁰ In 2023, fighters used a range of strategies to get food, money or water, for example by extorting "taxes" from fishing communities, stealing cattle and grain, or forcing residents to abandon water points.⁶¹ Many people have moved farther south in the division, aggravating stresses on the residents by increasing competition over land and worsening food insecurity.⁶²

Observers worry that the jihadist threat in combination with simmering inter-communal tensions could make conflicts deadlier. In the past, Boko Haram exploited social and economic hardship to recruit and acquire local logistical help.⁶³ As frictions

⁵⁷ For background on this force, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°291, *What Role for the Multinational Joint Task Force in Fighting Boko Haram?*, 7 July 2020.

⁵⁸ See Crisis Group Briefing, *JAS vs. ISWAP: The War of the Boko Haram Splinters*, op. cit.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, local official, Kousseri, October 2023.

⁶⁰ "Cameroon says military deployed after new militant attack kills at least a dozen", VOA, 3 August 2023.

⁶¹ On 3 August 2023, Boko Haram attacked Darak island again, killing at least twelve, mostly fishermen.

⁶² Cameroon is experiencing a cost-of-living crisis. According to the national statistics institute, inflation accelerated to 7.8 per cent in September 2023, compared to 6.3 per cent in September 2022. The removal of fuel subsidies in February pushed up transport costs by nearly 20 per cent in March. In addition, poor harvests resulted in below average reserves of sorghum, rice and corn in the Logone-et-Chari, Mayo-Sava and Mayo-Tsanaga divisions. See "Dans les zones de conflit, les récoltes insuffisantes entraîneront un début précoce de la soudure", Famine Early Warning Systems Network, December 2023.

⁶³ Crisis Group Report, *Cameroon: Confronting Boko Haram*, op. cit.

between Choa Arabs and Musgum increase in the face of resource scarcity, young men in particular could become more vulnerable to recruitment into, or collaboration with, jihadist groups, which often use the proceeds of local extortion rackets to provide for their recruits.⁶⁴ In addition, weapons are easily available in the region. One official expressed concern that disgruntled groups could tap into arms smuggling networks already used by militant groups if tensions boil over again.⁶⁵ Others worry that communities might resort to creating larger self-defence militias involving other affiliated ethnic groups living in Cameroon, but also across the border in Chad and Nigeria.⁶⁶

In response to Boko Haram's attacks, President Biya announced a reconstruction program for the region in December 2019. The Programme Spécial de Reconstruction et de Développement de la Région de l'Extrême Nord was designed to build reservoirs, roads, schools and clinics. Acknowledging the region's climate-related problems, as well as the militant threat, the program aims to counter both by developing livelihoods and strengthening the region's resilience to extreme weather events.⁶⁷ It was a commendable step, but nothing much happened over the next three years as the government selected the program's administrators. In October 2023, Yaoundé appeared to move to the next stage, saying it planned to invest a whopping \$3 billion in the region over five years.⁶⁸

Many Cameroonians are sceptical as to whether the government will complete the program. When its coordinators toured the Far North in late 2023, bad roads, flooding and insecurity prevented the delegation from reaching the Logone-et-Chari division, the area most affected by resource-related conflict. Moreover, the ambitious budget may be a veiled attempt at securing votes ahead of the presidential election scheduled for 2025. Still, if carried out as planned, the program could help stabilise the region and bring much-needed relief to its residents.⁶⁹

B. *Water Scarcity and Floods*

Getting water is an everyday struggle for people in the Far North. A staggering 44 per cent of boreholes and 61 per cent of wells in the country are situated in the Far North, illustrating the dearth of naturally accessible water sources despite the region's proximity to Lake Chad.⁷⁰ By contrast, residents of Cameroon's southern regions get most of their water from catchments perennially filled by rivers and springs. Cameroon is marked as "water insecure" in a recent UN report, due to poor scores in health,

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interviews, journalist and researcher, Maroua, August 2023.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°133, *Cameroon's Far North: Reconstruction amid Ongoing Conflict*, 25 October 2017.

⁶⁸ "Un programme spécial pour la reconstruction de la région de l'extrême-nord du Cameroun", VOA Afrique, 19 October 2023.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Cameroon scores 47 of 100 points, just seven points above the "critically insecure" category in which neighbouring Chad and Niger sit. The assessment examines ten areas: drinking water, sanitation, good health, water quality, water availability, water value, water governance, human safety, economic safety and water resource stability. "Global Water Security 2023 Assessment", UN University Institute for Water Environment and Health, April 2023.

sanitation, overall water availability and quality. This national ranking might be worse if the assessment metric considered the Far North alone.⁷¹

Lake Chad, which shares a long boundary with the Far North, has become less reliable as a water source. It is one of Africa's largest freshwater lakes, fed by the Logone and Chari Rivers, but its surface area varies greatly by season – and from year to year. Recurrent droughts in the 1970s and 1980s dramatically reduced the lake's volume. Although the volume rose substantially between 2018 and 2022 – notwithstanding a 2021 drought – water recovery is periodic, with variations in annual rainfall intensifying competition for water among the millions of people who live in the lake basin.⁷²

Besides droughts, the Far North is increasingly suffering from floods. Data suggest that floods and heavy rainfall were responsible for uprooting nearly 20 per cent of the 700,000 displaced people registered in February 2023.⁷³ In 2022, for example, floods in the Far North affected more than 258,000 people, in Logone-et-Chari, Mayo-Tsanaga and Mayo-Danay divisions.⁷⁴

Countries have tried to ease the water-related stresses in the region. Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria established the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) in 1964, with the Central African Republic and Libya joining in 1996 and 2008, respectively. The commission's role is to manage the lake and its associated waters, protect the area's fragile ecosystems and promote development.⁷⁵ One of its most important interventions was the development of an early warning system for flooding in the Logone basin, which covered Cameroon and Chad between 2016 and 2020.⁷⁶ The commission set up twenty hydrometric and meteorological stations to bolster early flood detection, part of a project in which the World Bank funded a dyke 70km long on the Logone River and another 27km long on Maga Dam.⁷⁷ These stations were

⁷¹ "Cameroon, Water", Interactive Country Fiches, UN Environment Program.

⁷² The Lake Chad basin is home to about 50 million people. B. Pham-Duc et al., "The Lake Chad Hydrology under Current Climate Change", *Nature Journal*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2020).

⁷³ "Rapport du Suivi des Déplacements, République Du Cameroun, Région de l'Extrême-Nord, Round 26, 8-22 février 2023", op. cit.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interviews, NGO staff and academic, Maroua, August 2023. The October-November 2022 floods displaced more than 70,000 people, destroyed 48,000 hectares of farmland, caused the loss of more than 6,700 domestic animals, flooded more than 2,600 latrines and inundated 133 schools, preventing 40,000 students from attending classes. All ten town districts of the Logone-et-Chari division were affected. In November, the public health ministry reported a cholera epidemic in the region affecting 395 people and causing seventeen deaths. "Cameroun – Extrême-Nord : Note d'information sur les inondations n°3 (au 15 novembre 2022)", OCHA, 24 November 2022.

⁷⁵ "Ongoing Projects", Lake Chad Basin Commission, 23 July 2021.

⁷⁶ The Emergency Flood Control Project in the Far North was funded by the World Bank and involved collaboration with the VIVA LOGONE project (Development and Valorisation of Investments in the Logone Valley), which the Cameroonian government created to promote rice farming. "LCBC and Semry Renew Framework Partnership Agreement", LCBC, October 2023. In April 2012, member states adopted the LCBC Water Charter for the management of riparian waters as a common international resource.

⁷⁷ "Gestion des inondations dans la région de l'Extrême-Nord au Cameroun : les riverains n'ont plus peur des pluies diluviennes depuis que la digue du Logone et le barrage de Maga ont été réhabilités", World Bank, 10 November 2020.

mainly confined to areas where Cameroon's state-owned company Semry was developing rice farms.⁷⁸

But, even by the accounts of LCBC personnel, the environmental monitoring network around Lake Chad is under-funded and poorly run.⁷⁹ The commission has completed several projects in Cameroon, including planting trees to improve land quality in the Far North, as well as building a handful of clinics and schools.⁸⁰ Yet its role in the Far North's water crisis has largely been limited to urging Cameroon and other member states to monitor the situation and adapt to climate variability.⁸¹

In addition, Cameroon established the National Climate Change Observatory in 2009 with the goal of assessing the socio-economic and environmental impact of climate change and proposing measures to mitigate risks. Its scientists regularly conduct fieldwork in the Far North and publish seasonal alerts on local water and temperature profiles, with three- and six-month forecasts.⁸² In theory, its work underpins environmental and resource planning in the region (as it does in the rest of the country). In practice, however, it lacks the clout to influence government policies, and economic planners and administrators rarely consult it.⁸³ Furthermore, the observatory and government departments with portfolios directly related to water management – such as fisheries and livestock, agriculture and rural development – often fight over turf regarding the scope of their responsibilities.⁸⁴ Despite the observatory's important early warning work, there is little evidence that local administrators incorporate its findings in their policies.⁸⁵

C. *Opaque Land Management and Corruption*

Poor land and water management coupled with pervasive corruption risk accelerating the impact of climate stresses in Cameroon's Far North.⁸⁶ Land management is often opaque. Local administrators and traditional rulers have authority to allocate land, but it is often unclear who has the final say in actual sales.⁸⁷ As a result, a piece of land may be allocated or sold to two or more different people before the onerous process of issuing a title deed gets under way. Mistrust of land administrators is therefore widespread. In addition, experts told Crisis Group that laws and practices

⁷⁸ "LCBC and Semry Renew Framework Partnership Agreement", op. cit.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian staff, Maroua, August 2023. "Better Governance of Underfunded, Poorly Managed Lake Chad Basin Key to Resolving Conflict, Suffering across Region, Speakers Tell Security Council", UN, 8212th Meeting, SC/13259, 22 March 2018.

⁸⁰ "Extrême-Nord : 356,8 millions de FCFA pour le reboisement", *Actu Cameroun*, 3 September 2020.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Crisis Group interviews, climate experts and local administrator at water security workshops, Yaoundé and Kousséri, October 2023.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* The observatory falls under the environment ministry.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interviews, National Climate Change Observatory personnel, Yaoundé, October 2023.

⁸⁶ Although land disputes are common in Cameroon, those in the Far North draw in a particularly ethnically diverse set of sedentary, nomadic and semi-nomadic groups competing for temporary or permanent control of land. Crisis Group interviews, National Climate Change Observatory officials, Yaoundé, August-October 2023; university lecturer, Maroua, August-October 2023.

⁸⁷ Crisis Group interviews, women and men civil society leaders, displaced women, Maroua, Yaoundé and Kousséri, August-October 2023.

governing land tenure, water and livestock are outdated.⁸⁸ For example, the 1998 Water Code makes no provision for regulating competing water usage, which leaves local authorities on shaky legal ground when they have to adjudicate disputes over water.⁸⁹ Maps of grazing corridors are likewise in urgent need of updating to account for demographic change and loss of vegetation.⁹⁰

Corruption at all levels of government compounds the problem, as do socio-economic divides.⁹¹ For example, Musgum farmers consider themselves to be rightful landowners, perceiving the majority Choa Arabs as newcomers with no legal claim to the area. Many think of the Choa Arabs as concerned only with making money.⁹² Such assumptions feed the widely held belief among Musgum that Choa Arabs bribe administrators to acquire land in Musgum territory and get their kin appointed as traditional rulers.⁹³ For their part, Choa Arabs argue that the Musgum unfairly exclude them from the floodplains along the Logone River, which leaves them with no option but to use their demographic and financial sway to obtain land in the area or to convince officials to decide land disputes in their favour.⁹⁴

Women from both communities face additional obstacles in obtaining and managing land and water as a result of patriarchal practices. Both Choa Arab and Musgum men take a dim view of women owning land and exclude women from debates on land and water management, the outcomes of which nevertheless have a direct impact on women's activities.⁹⁵ Men typically own farmland and water points, while women irrigate crops and look after water sources, such as canals. Women and children also fetch water for domestic use, as is customary throughout Cameroon. In some areas in the Far North, women and children walk 8km to the closest water point, often leaving home in the middle of the night in order to get back in time to prepare a meal.⁹⁶ This division of labour likely contributes to the low literacy rate in the region, particularly when it comes to girls.⁹⁷ Yet women are excluded from water management committees and rarely consulted when disputes arise.⁹⁸

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interviews, herders' association member and water foundation staff, Maroua and Yaoundé, August-October 2023.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interviews, water foundation officials, Yaoundé, October 2023.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, lawyer, human rights defender and woman water expert, Yaoundé, October 2023.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Crisis Group interviews, academic, agricultural technician and administrator, Maroua and Kousseri, August-October 2023. One source of these ideas is that Choa Arab parents in the Far North are often reluctant to send children to school, preferring that they take up trade or herding to help support the family.

⁹³ Crisis Group interviews, rural and agriculture development expert, Maroua, August 2023.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, journalists and NGO workers, Maroua, August 2023; rural development and agriculture expert, Maroua, August 2023; NGO leader and environmental campaigner, Yaoundé, October 2023.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, women's group, Kousseri, October 2023.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, woman civil society leader, Maroua, August 2023.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, women civil society leaders, Maroua and Yaoundé, August-October 2023.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

IV. **Building a More Peaceful and Resource-secure Region**

Cameroon's response to inter-communal conflict in the Far North has thus far been mostly a band-aid.⁹⁹ Security forces have helped prevent large-scale violence and capped tensions in the Far North. Authorities mobilised communal leaders to set up platforms for dialogue and allowed humanitarian organisations to give locals food and temporary housing. Worthy and at time effective as they have been, these steps have largely focused on preventing escalation in the Choa Arab-Musgum feud rather than addressing underlying climate shocks or simmering tensions among other ethnic groups in the Far North.¹⁰⁰ Keeping a large number of soldiers in the region is not a long-term solution, given that the military is already stretched by its battles with insurgents elsewhere.¹⁰¹ The Far North remains sorely underdeveloped, while climate change threatens to make arable land, pasture and water even scarcer as time goes on. The Cameroonian authorities should develop policies that address drivers of inter-communal conflict. Helping prepare the region to withstand extreme weather events can help.

A. *Averting Violence and Helping the Vulnerable*

The Cameroonian authorities should build on existing conflict prevention measures to avert more inter-communal violence in the Far North. The anger generated by the 2021 conflict is still palpable in the Logone-et-Chari division, raising the prospect of renewed clashes between Choa Arabs and Musgum or among other ethnic groups. Local authorities should urgently roll out additional early warning committees in all the affected villages around Logone-Birni. These committees, which should include women and youth leaders, would ideally help manage ethnic tensions, mediate minor disputes and report major threats to local administrators, security forces and judicial authorities.¹⁰² To overcome the challenges faced by past peace efforts, authorities should ensure that committee members are representative of all parties to the conflict, trained in dispute resolution and regularly sharing best practices. Cameroon's international partners, such as the UN and the French development agency, which already have large programs in the area, can help build a functioning system and fund training.

Prevention measures should also address the climate stressors that contribute to inter-communal frictions. Cameroon's climate change observatory should develop an alert system monitoring critical climate-related issues, in collaboration with regional and sub-regional administrators, as well as related ministries.¹⁰³ This system could include joint monthly forecasts for precipitation, temperatures and water

⁹⁹ Some of these policy proposals were raised in water security workshops, held online and in person in October 2023, with experts in Yaoundé and women in flood- and conflict-affected communities in Kousseri.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interviews, academic and NGO workers, Maroua, August 2023.

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°188, *A Second Look at Cameroon's Anglophone Special Status*, 31 March 2023.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interview, peace campaigner from the Far North, Yaoundé, October 2023.

¹⁰³ In particular, the agriculture and rural development ministry, the water and energy ministry and the livestock, fisheries and animal industries ministry.

reserves, assessing their likely impact on agricultural, fishing and pastoral activity as well as on food reserves. Crucially, the government should press relevant ministries to incorporate the observatory's recommendations into their work, especially when designing the region's special reconstruction program. At the local level, the monitoring carried out by the observatory would provide administrators with useful data and also help officials in the Far North's six administrative divisions choose appropriate conflict prevention measures, such as technical advice for farmers, fishers and herders, food assistance to the most vulnerable and targeted patrols by the security forces.

Additionally, with support from international partners, the government should continue to provide humanitarian relief and advocate for increased financial support to meet the basic needs of conflict-affected persons. The government should focus on improving security conditions and social infrastructure in abandoned areas, while allowing displaced people to decide whether they can return safely. Local administrators should work together to provide dignified living conditions for the displaced, even if on a temporary basis. The government, with the support of its international partners, should also begin to prepare for displaced persons' gradual return and resettlement as security and economic conditions improve.

B. *Improving Resilience through Governance, Accountability and Reconstruction*

As the threat of immediate violence subsides, the authorities should ease simmering tensions by reducing the harmful impact of poor governance on the already precarious livelihoods of the Far North's residents.

First, the government's approach to resource management should be more inclusive. Given the competing authority of local administrators and traditional rulers over land and water allocation, Cameroon's national government should foster the involvement of a broader array of local representatives in joint consultations on local resource management. Town councils should make sure that existing water management committees have a fair representation of people from the ethnic groups in their areas, as well as women and youth leaders. These committees should oversee the council's construction and management of water points. International donors and NGOs considering providing development assistance to town councils in these areas should train local officials and traditional rulers in inclusive, participatory approaches to development, which will help rebuild trust. With international support, Yaoundé could also provide pre-deployment training for officials posted to the region, which should focus on the links between climate-sensitive resources, governance and ethnic tensions.

Secondly, the government should urgently address the existing regulatory shortcomings in laws and practices governing land tenure. In this regard, it should hasten the adoption of a revised Water Code that sets out which uses of water are to be considered priorities in the event of competing claims on the resource. Meanwhile, national and regional authorities should demarcate grazing corridors as part of the process of clarifying private and public land ownership. These measures may be a drop in the ocean given Cameroon's complex, chaotic land ownership system. But if ac-

accompanied by judicial action that demonstrates zero tolerance for corruption among local officials, they would go some way toward restoring the public's trust in the state.

Thirdly, Yaoundé should take steps to hold perpetrators of violence to account and build confidence in central and local officials. For example, the government could support the Far North with financing and personnel to conduct thorough investigations into past and present violence, as well as to ensure fair trials for alleged perpetrators, who in many cases have been through a long stretch of pre-trial detention. By delivering justice quickly and impartially, authorities can discourage those who might otherwise keep resorting to organised violence along ethnic lines. In civil matters, the judicial authorities could also use traditional village courts to seek an amicable settlement (locally known in French as *accord à l'amiable*) between the parties, referring the matter to state courts only if mediation is impossible. In parallel, central authorities should threaten to sanction state officials whose biased land allocation has contributed to communal tensions, unless they opt to work with judicial authorities and affected communities to clarify ownership of disputed land expeditiously.

Restoring people's rights is unlikely to be enough to end the fighting, however. State courts adjudicating cases that involve violence or dispossession should conduct a thorough assessment of the damages and losses suffered by the victims of the cases they handle. The government, for its part, should set up a victims' fund to provide individual or community-based compensation that would enable people to resume their income-generating activities or to start new ones. This process should involve consultations with community representatives to increase transparency and avoid inflaming tensions but also to build confidence in the state's ability to serve its citizens. This form of compensation could help supplement and perhaps eventually replace humanitarian aid. Such initiatives should consider women's specific losses, such as their farming and fish processing tools and market goods.

The government already has at hand what could be a vitally important stabilisation tool in the special reconstruction program for the Far North. The program, the details of which Yaoundé is still working out, is an opportunity both to channel extra money to this underfunded region and to ensure that its residents have adequate resources to coexist peacefully, even if the project's original mandate focuses on repairing the damage wrought by Islamist militant violence.¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group has been advocating for increased government engagement in the Far North since 2017, setting out the rationale and guidelines for a reconstruction program for the area.¹⁰⁵

As the prime minister's office works on the program's design, it should include specific projects to ease water scarcity in the region. For example, the government could clearly demarcate pastures, drill boreholes on land set aside for that use, and develop rules for digging basins on the floodplains of the Logone River. Authorities should involve the experts working for the climate change observatory in devising the region's special reconstruction program. Given the difficulties of access due to insecurity and poor roads, the government should make every effort to guarantee the equitable delivery of development assistance to the Logone-et-Chari division, includ-

¹⁰⁴ The government estimates that the program will cost \$3 billion, but it has not identified sources of funding or a timeframe for the work. "Extrême-Nord : 1810 milliards de FCFA pour reconstruire la région", *Actu Cameroun*, 16 November 2022.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group Briefing, *Cameroon's Far North: Reconstruction amid Ongoing Conflict*, op. cit.

ing by routing aid through Chad. The government should also ensure that the program committee, made up of representatives from government ministries, includes women and integrates a gender perspective into its activities.

As part of a global commitment to addressing climate change, Cameroon's international partners and UN agencies, particularly the Development and Environment Programmes, should support Cameroon in improving its climate adaptation strategy. While Yaoundé has focused on climate mitigation and green energy, the Far North offers an opportunity to test a variety of conflict-sensitive climate resilience responses, such as flood management, regulation of fishing canals and innovation in agriculture. Backed by its foreign partners and in collaboration with the LCBC, the Cameroonian authorities should define their adaptation priorities, establish areas for regional co-operation and lobby for funding during international climate negotiations. Preparing this region for future weather shocks could help reduce competition over land and water, thus preventing further conflict in an already troubled area.

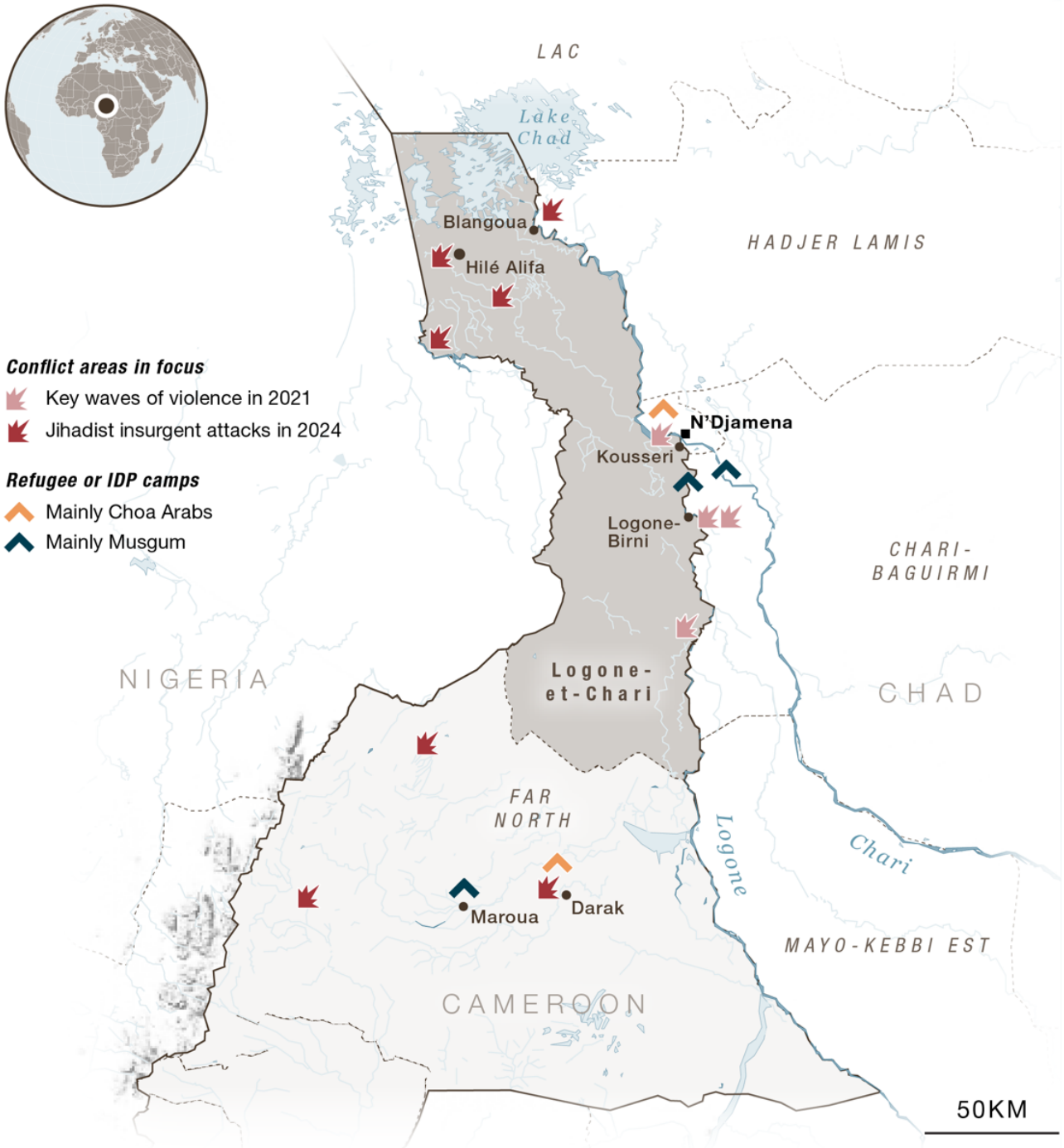
V. Conclusion

Cameroon's Far North is struggling under the strain of conflict exacerbated by climate change, which is triggering disputes over water, land for farming and herding, and river areas for fishing. These resource conflicts between communities have turned deadly in an area already scarred by jihadist insurgencies spilling over from Nigeria. The Choa Arab-Musgum conflict and the threat of other flare-ups of inter-communal violence underscore the need for a multifaceted response that addresses the tensions between ethnic groups fairly and effectively, while tackling the climate-related changes that are intensifying local grievances and resentment.

National authorities have already laid out ambitious investment plans for the north, but these need to be put into effect and built upon. Foreign donors should stand ready to support Cameroon's efforts to strengthen resource governance, justice and dispute resolution mechanisms, as well as bolster plans to adapt to climate change and expand access to land and water. Given the deterioration in food security in the Far North as well as the humanitarian crisis sparked by fighting and forced displacement, the need for action has become more pressing. Both the government and its international partners should act now to address the roots of growing communal tensions and prevent another wave of violence.

Yaoundé/Brussels, 25 April 2024

Appendix A: Map of the 2021 Choa Arab-Musgum Conflict and Displacement Crisis



Source: Crisis Group research, OSM, Copernicus. CRISIS GROUP

Appendix B: Timeline of Cameroon's Water Crisis

First Wave of Violence

10 August 2021 – Logone Birni

In the village of Missiska in the Logone Birni division (Logone-et-Chari, Far North), violent clashes erupted when a basin dug by Musgum fisherfolk trapped and killed cattle belonging to Arab Choa herders. The Musgum evacuated women and children to their Musgum sister community living on the other side of the Logone River in Chad. The conflict killed at least 45 people and injured 74 others. At least nineteen villages burned down and 40 others were abandoned by the inhabitants.

14 August 2021 – Kousseri

Far North Governor Midjiyawa Bakari visited Kousseri, the capital of Logone-et-Chari, to ease tensions. Authorities ordered the deployment of security forces in more than one hundred affected villages in the area. Meanwhile, community leaders read a joint statement in which they committed "to spare no effort for a definitive return of peace between the two communities that coexist".

23 September 2021 – Waza

Arab Choa people from Malia and Toukoumaya villages clashed in a land dispute around Waza, a town in Logone-et-Chari. Five people were injured.

2 October 2021 – Kousseri

Choa Arabs and Musgum clashed in Kousseri's Gueli neighborhood after a dispute between members of the groups. One person was injured, and a vehicle was torched.

Second Wave of Violence

5 December 2021 – Ouloumsa

Clashes among herders, farmers and fisherfolk broke out in the village of Ouloumsa, Logone-Birni town, Far North.

8 December – Kousseri

The clashes that broke out in Ouloumsa spread through villages quickly, reaching Kousseri on 8 December 2021. At least 44 were killed and more than 100 injured.

16 December 2021 – Kousseri

Governmental delegation including the minister of territorial administration, politicians and military officials consulted Arab Choas and Musgum traditional authorities in a peacebuilding outreach. About 100,000 people had been displaced.

10 January 2022 – Kousseri

In Kousseri, security forces clamp down on Arab Choa crowds protesting the arrest of the former mayor accused of involvement in the December 2021 killings, leading to four casualties and arrests. The next day, Musgums and Arab Choas clashed with live ammunition after accusing them of killing two members of the Musgum community.

6-7 October 2023 – Logone-et-Chari

Between 6 and 7 October 2023, Kotoko farmers clashed with Arab Choa herders in Makary, Goulfey, Amdagalgui and Ngouma (Logone-et-Chari, Far North) leading to at least two casualties and 20 persons injured.

December 2023-February 2024 – Darak

Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province militants launched over a dozen attacks on fishing communities in the northern part of Logone-et-Chari division, abducting around 25 people and killing at least seven. Thousands fled to the southern parts of the division, increasing the pressure on available resources in that area.

Looking Ahead

In February 2024, stakeholders met in Yaounde to harmonise plans for the development of the Far North as a presidential reconstruction programme announced in May 2022 and estimated at \$3 billion is set for implementation later in the year.

Appendix C: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kyiv, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. The ideas, opinions and comments expressed by Crisis Group are entirely its own and do not represent or reflect the views of any donor. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australia (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade), Austria (Austrian Development Agency), Canada (Global Affairs Canada), Complex Risk Analytics Fund (CRAF'd), Denmark (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), European Union (Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, DG INTPA), Finland (Ministry for Foreign Affairs), France (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency), Ireland (Department of Foreign Affairs), Japan (Japan International Cooperation Agency and Japan External Trade Organization), Principality of Liechtenstein (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Luxembourg (Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs), The Netherlands (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), New Zealand (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade), Norway (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Qatar (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Slovenia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Sweden (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Switzerland (Federal Department of Foreign Affairs), United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), United Kingdom (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office) and the World Bank.

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April 2024

Appendix D: Reports and Briefings on the Middle East and North Africa since 2021

Special Reports and Briefings

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2021-2022, Special Briefing N°6, 13 September 2021.

7 Priorities for the G7: Managing the Global Fallout of Russia's War on Ukraine, Special Briefing N°7, 22 June 2022.

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2022-2023, Special Briefing N°8, 14 September 2022.

Seven Priorities for Preserving the OSCE in a Time of War, Special Briefing N°9, 29 November 2022.

Seven Priorities for the G7 in 2023, Special Briefing N°10, 15 May 2023.

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2023-2024, Crisis Group Special Briefing N°11, 14 September 2023.

Syria: Ruling over Aleppo's Ruins, Middle East Report N°234, 9 May 2022 (also available in Arabic).

Iraq: Stabilising the Contested District of Sinjar, Middle East Report N°235, 31 May 2022 (also available in Arabic).

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