

The Bakassi Peninsula: A Discreet Problem with Major Implications

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For the last decade Nigeria has been making international headlines due to a series of developments that affect not only the country, but also its immediate neighborhood – the Republic of Cameroon in particular. These include the growth of violent extremism, namely Boko Haram, which has a direct impact on neighboring countries such as Cameroon and Chad, the Ebola outbreak, which may potentially spread to Cameroon and move onwards to Central Africa, and the fragile situation in the Niger Delta region, such as militancy and criminal activities – both inland (illegal oil-bunkering) and at sea (piracy and illegal activities such as narcotics, human and small-arms trafficking).

However, one development in particular has not been given significant attention by the international media, and it influences those very developments that permeate the Nigerian/Cameroonian border: the decades-long dispute over the borders extending from Lake Chad in the north, all the way to the resource-rich Bakassi Peninsula in the south. It is the latter that is a major point of disagreement between Abuja and Yaoundé, having produced military confrontations, thousands of displaced people, and strained relations. Considering these cross-border challenges that threaten stability in both countries, it is necessary to improve bilateral relations and cooperation, something which cannot be attained without efficiently assessing the southern border dispute.

The Disputed Peninsula

Since colonial rule, the Bakassi Peninsula has been of

strategic importance. However, it was not until the African independence movements in Cameroon and Nigeria that the peninsula became a major source of tensions. At the core of the dispute is not only the strategic importance of the territory, but most importantly its extremely rich and diverse resources. The discovery of large deposits of oil in the neighboring Niger Delta in the late 1950's, along with the prospect that the peninsula itself might be sitting over one, escalated tensions between the two young sovereign states. In addition, the likely existence of considerable gas reserves in Bakassi worsened the situation.¹

Tensions boiled over in the 1980's and early 1990's, a time when the two countries faced each other in direct military confrontations. In an attempt to settle the dispute in a definitive manner, and avoid an all-out war, on 29 March 1994, Cameroonian authorities took their case to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Eight years later, on 10 October 2002, the ICJ ruled that the Bakassi Peninsula should be handed-over to Cameroon. The decision was based on maps and agreements from the colonial era, namely the Anglo-German agreement of 1913, which established a maritime and land border separating German 'Kamerun' and British Nigeria.

Nevertheless, the ICJ decision did not end the fierce political opposition by Nigeria. The Nigerian House of

¹ According to an article dated from 2006, the peninsula was thought to contain up to 10% of the world's oil and gas reserves. See "Nigeria hands Bakassi to Cameroon" (BBC, 14 August 2006).



Representatives rejected the transfer of sovereignty and passed a resolution requesting then-President Olusegun Obasanjo to demand an UN-supervised referendum on whether the Bakassi's inhabitants wanted to remain part of Nigeria or become part of Cameroon. It is worth noting that it is estimated that by the time of the ICJ ruling 90 percent of the 200,000-300,000 people living in Bakassi were Nigerian, the majority of them fishermen and their respective families. It is not surprising then that the bulk of these Nigerians opposed the ICJ's ruling from the very beginning. However, despite popular opposition and political disgruntlement, President Obasanjo rejected the resolution.

After four years of unabated Nigerian opposition and delays in the process of territorial transfer, the Nigerian head-of-state and his Cameroonian counterpart, President Paul Biya, agreed on a set of parameters to ease the implementation of the ICJ's ruling and the peaceful hand-over of the peninsula. The written understanding, named Green Tree Agreement, established that Nigeria would withdraw its military from the Bakassi, and in return Cameroon authorities would protect and safeguard the fundamental rights and freedoms of Nigerians living in the region, paving the way for a seemingly complete transfer of sovereignty. However, this understanding was not ratified by the Nigerian National Assembly. In addition, Nigeria's constitution clearly states that Bakassi is still an integral part of the country, hence legally placing the territory and its people under Nigerian sovereign control. Still, the Bakassi was handed over on 14 August 2008.

A Heavy Toll for Civilians

Shortly after the handover, one hundred thousand Nigerians living in the peninsula fled into Nigerian territory as they feared a future where they would be vulnerable to harassment by Cameroonian authorities. In fact, according to Nigerians living in Bakassi around that time, as soon as the last of the Nigerian military withdrew, Cameroonian authorities began changing names of localities, beating civilians, disrupting fishing activities and imposing heavy taxes. A year later, on 16 October 2009, Cameroonian gendarmes killed six Nigerian fishermen in Bakassi territorial waters. The situation worsened from the moment the Nigerian government decided not to appeal the ICJ ruling within the 10-year statute of limitations. Authorities were rumored to have hoisted Cameroonian flags in Nigerian villages, while also obliging Nigerians to change their names, and to carry Cameroonian symbols.

March 2013 marked one of the most terrible events since the handover: Cameroonian security authorities attacked Efut Obot Ikot, a settlement located in the Bakassi Peninsula and home to thousands of Bakassi displaced people, the majority of whom were Nigerians. It is estimated that

at least five people were killed and 1800 displaced as a result of the attack.²

These events provide a clear picture of the aftershock that followed the 2002 decision by the ICJ to transfer sovereignty of the resource-rich Bakassi Peninsula to Cameroon. In a fierce war of words, the Bakassi Nigerians argue that Cameroonian authorities are violating the Green Tree Agreement. The Cameroonian authorities insist that Nigerians have been violating fishing limits, not paying taxes and running criminal networks. There have also been calls for intervention by the Nigerian government in order to protect Nigerians from Cameroonian gendarmes. Such calls have culminated in clear indications given by a Nigerian military commander, last year, that two forward operational bases would be setup close to the disputed region.³ These, however, have not yet materialized.

Demarcating the physical boundary is a task that now falls to the UN-supported Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission (CNMC). The demarcation process has been delayed mostly due to obstacles related to topography, climate, and turmoil in the Gulf of Guinea. Adding to this, popular opposition is also to blame for those delays. Having known what happened to the Nigerian population in Bakassi in the aftermath of the transfer of sovereignty, fears have increased over what may happen in the event of further territorial concessions. The region's youth began protesting in June 2014 when members of the UN/CNMC, accompanied by Nigerian soldiers, arrived in the boundary communities of Biajua and Danare, in Cross River state, to continue the demarcation.⁴ Victor Ndoma-Egba, Nigeria's senate majority leader, has also expressed his opposition towards ceding more territory, arguing that not only it would be wrong to give away more Nigerian land, but also that local opinion should be taken into consideration, insisting that vital farmlands would be lost to Cameroon.⁵

The ICJ decision to cede the territory to Cameroon was largely seen as an efficient and peaceful way to resolve a long-simmering border dispute. Most notably, the decision averted further direct military confrontation, and as such it has received praises by the international community. Nonetheless, the hidden truth seems to be that as tensions between both government's authorities eased, it was the core of the populace who saw their situation deteriorating. Now the suffering goes two ways: on the one hand, the population that decided to stay in the Peninsula has been targeted by Cameroonian security forc-

2 "Bakassi people: Attacked in Cameroon, abandoned in Nigeria" [*PUNCH Nigeria*, 18 April 2013].

3 "FG plans military bases in Bakassi" [*PUNCH Nigeria*, 10 April 2013].

4 "Nigeria: Tension in Cross River Over Ceding of Territories to Cameroon" [*Daily Independent via allAfrica*, 4 June 2014].

5 "Nigeria in The Verge of Losing More Territories to Cameroon" [*Cameroon Web News*, 13 July 2014].



es; on the other hand, the situation of those who decided to flee into Nigeria has not been appropriately assessed by the Nigerian federal and state governments. Regarding the latter, Bakassi people who fled to Nigeria – whether by their own will or by force – have not been given conditions to exercise their traditional livelihoods, remain largely underdeveloped, and do not have the right to vote for local or national elections. These people have become what can be called of ‘quasi-stateless people’. All in all, although not dismissing the lack of accountability and responsibility of both countries authorities, the ICJ decision showed the international community’s lack of understanding over social dynamics and indifference towards the population’s welfare and best interests. The fear is that once the boundary demarcation finishes the Cross River State will lose a substantial portion of its land and sea territory to Cameroon. Such an outcome will affect Nigeria’s tax coffers, and it will also have serious implications for the native population, who could be deprived of their traditional livelihoods. Most importantly, the border dispute and the resulting social crisis serves to further damage relations between the two neighbours, hindering efforts to deepen collaboration on other fronts, such as Boko Haram and the Ebola outbreak, while contributing to a deterioration in regional stability.

From a Shaky Present towards a Bleak Future?

The Nigerian government’s failure to assess the needs of the displaced people further weakens social stability around the resource-rich Niger Delta and Gulf of Guinea. A 2008 amnesty for militants who mounted a violent uprising in the Niger Delta was purely a means of buying-off militants with cash and vocational training. But given that the region’s other issues remain unresolved, whatever foundation the vocational training creates is susceptible to crumble once cash stops pouring in.

Coupled with the ceding of the peninsula, the recent attacks on Nigerian Bakassis have increased disgruntlement among Nigerian politicians and general populace towards Cameroonian authorities. These gave rise to renewed calls for a referendum, and even requests for an armed intervention by Nigerian security forces in order to protect Nigerian nationals. Armed action will certainly bring about more costs than benefits, therefore making the referendum a better option.

Considering the existence of a fragile amnesty, a weak economy and lack of basic services, it is likely that an additional influx of poor people from the Bakassi region will lead to further disgruntlement and disillusionment, with potentially dangerous consequences. Given the fact that the region has a high population density, a continued influx of displaced people will most probably result in an increase in violence over land and water resources. Under this scenario, the already fragile social and economic situation may result in more fighting, which already periodically occurs,⁶ and generate a new wave of illegal activities, such as piracy, oil theft, and kidnappings.

During last decade militants threatened to disrupt oil production in the oil-rich Niger Delta, which is Nigeria’s financial lifeline. Militancy is on the rise in the Bakassi Peninsula. A number of paramilitary and vigilante groups have checked the secession of the oil-rich peninsula, having even attempted to disrupt oil-exploration operations through armed attacks and kidnappings. Absent new countermeasures, it is probable that Bakassi rebels will join forces with the militant group Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). The deteriorating social situation in the region, and the seeming neglect by the Nigerian federal and state governments, are fundamental variables when considering an increase in vigilantism, militancy and criminal activities.

The most dangerous outcome might be a return to open hostilities between Nigeria and Cameroon, which would worsen the social crisis in Bakassi. Nonetheless, this scenario may seem highly unlikely as military warfare is not in the immediate interest of either country, as they

⁶ Since 2010, 74 violent incidents have been reported in Cross River State, resulting in 274 civilian deaths. Competition over land was one of the main causes behind the casualties. See Conflict Bulletin: “Cross River State - July 2014” (*Fund For Peace*, 10 July 2014).



are both grappling with the threats posed by violent extremism, the Ebola outbreak, and maritime insecurity.

Thinking Outside the Box

Coupled with the ceding of the peninsula, the recent attacks on Nigerian Bakassis have increased disgruntlement among Nigerian politicians and general populace towards Cameroonian authorities. These gave rise to renewed calls for a referendum, and even requests for an armed intervention by Nigerian security forces in order to protect Nigerian nationals. Armed action will certainly bring about more costs than benefits, therefore making the referendum a better option. Both the Nigerian and Cameroonian governments should look beyond immediate threats and realize that the deterioration of the situation in Bakassi threatens to bring about dangerous outcomes.

Nigeria and Cameroon must think outside of the box so that there can be hope for a definitive, peaceful solution. One way to do so is for Abuja and Yaoundé to re-negotiate the Bakassi Peninsula's status outside of the ICJ framework, and find a common ground on a locally-made solution. Certainly a referendum should be accompanied by a comprehensive plan over joint-exploration of natural resources, as Cameroon would surely be unwilling to give away such a strategically important territory. In sum, a referendum would be the best solution for the crisis, as it would not only safeguard the population's best interests, but also give more legitimacy to an agreed settlement than an outcome that relies on a map elaborated by Europe's former colonial powers.

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