



JOINT FLASH REPORT

On December 8, 2021, the Database and CHRDA received reports of a major burning incident underway in the city of Bamenda, in the North-West Region. A large number of civilians were affected by the incident, and several were killed. Together, we have carried out a rapid initial investigation. Our findings confirm the wide spread of burnings on the evening of December 8. Eyewitness accounts, video narration, and other information identify military as the perpetrator. The evidence conclusively indicates that state forces, likely including elements of the 3rd Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR) and associated forces, were responsible for this attack.

Geolocation

The Database received and analyzed a large quantity of videos and images related to this incident, although many were taken at night, which limits their geolocation potential. Based on information that the incident took place on or around Back Travellers and Azire Quarters, along Mbengwi Road, the Database identified an area in which the incident likely occurred. Twitter user ‘Israel Ayongwa’ (@iayongwa) suggested a number of probable sites within this identified search area. The Database reviewed these suggested geolocations, and believes them to be largely accurate. Thus, we decided to wait until post-burning satellite imagery became available, in order to investigate and document the scale of the incident.

Planet Labs imagery for December 8 was taken at 9:39am Cameroon time, before the incident occurred, and as such does not show any damage. In contrast, Planet Labs imagery for December 9 clearly shows significant areas of burning along Mbengwi Road, with an isolated burning closer to the centre of Bamenda at the Hospital Roundabout. The burnings appear to be largely congruent with sites identified by Israel Ayongwa. The Database believes that additional buildings were burned, as video evidence indicates that other buildings in this area suffered burning although their roofs did not sustain damage that would be visible from satellite images.

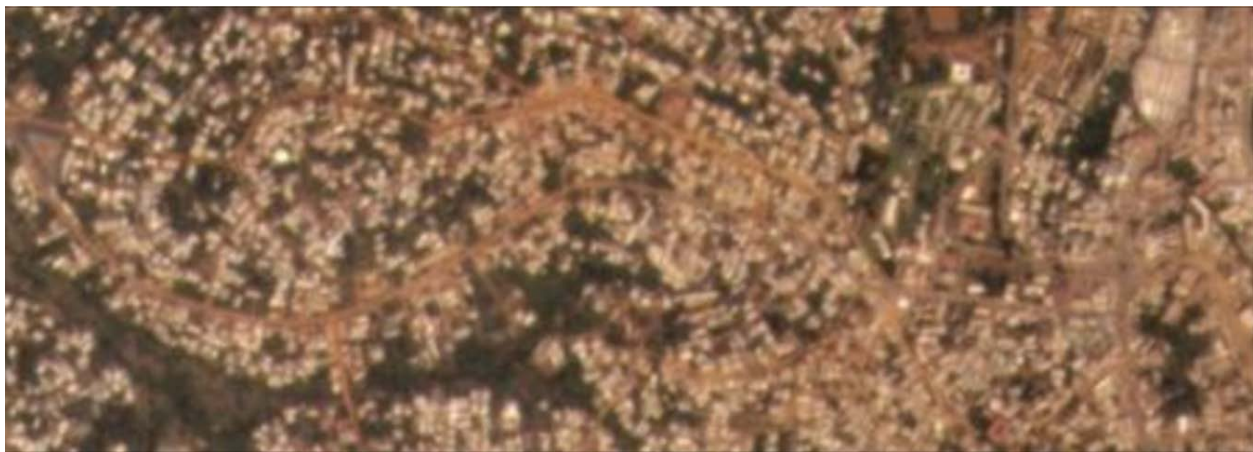


Figure 1: Satellite image of Mbengwi Road on December 8, 2021 (via Planet Labs)



Figure 2: Satellite image of Mbengwi Road on December 9, 2021 (via Planet Labs); identifiable burning sites labelled with red rectangles.

Sequence of Events

CHRDA conducted interviews with eyewitnesses from Bamenda. From a combination of eyewitness accounts and information from social media and news outlets, we identified a likely sequence of events.

The burning is believed to have been sparked by an IED attack on a military convoy carried out by the Bamenda Brigade of the Ambazonia Defence Forces (ADF). The ADF claimed the IED attack at this [link](#). It is possible that the military convoy was returning from an inauguration of the Our Lady of Fatima Shrine in Abangoh, Bamenda, led by Archbishop Andrew Nkea. Videos of the inauguration show that an officer was present, along with BIR soldiers.

Reports suggest that the IED attack killed multiple members of Cameroon's Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR), one of whom has been identified as Patrice Teunkwa. Reports also state that a senior officer was killed. It is possible that the senior officer was the one at the inauguration. There is no video footage or photographic image available of the initial attack on the BIR vehicles, but we have been able to confirm that it took place through triangulation of multiple trusted sources.

In retaliation for the IED attack, it appears that members of the military engaged in scorched-earth tactics, burning civilian structures including homes and markets. As satellite imagery demonstrates, the burnings appear to be widespread. There are reports that the military shot dead multiple civilians in the attack, including some who tried to stop fires in their buildings. Video evidence shows multiple corpses that appear to have been burned to death.

An eyewitness whose house was burned in the attack told CHRDA that she was seated at home at about 2:00pm with her grandson when she heard a very loud blast, immediately followed by gunshots. She got scared of being hit by a stray bullet as her house was very close to the road and lay down on her stomach on the floor. The next thing she saw was smoke coming out of her neighbor's house and soldiers shooting at her door. She peeked through a hole in her door, as she was afraid to fully lift her head, and saw soldiers dressed in blue-black attire with guns. The soldiers numbered over 20 and some were carrying gallons of petrol.



The witness's compound was big with a main building in front and a kitchen and boys' quarter behind. In front of the main building was a small house being used for business. The military men poured the petrol on it and it began to catch fire. Her neighbors' houses were already on fire and she thought they had died inside. She managed to crawl on her belly with her grandson and escape through the back door. At the time of the incident, her husband, who is a contractor, had travelled to Limbe and was on his way back home. When the soldiers burned the main building, all their property was destroyed. The fire consumed the husband's laptops and documents, including reference documents from recent contracts he had completed, plus the children's certificates.

Another witness also testified that she heard a blast while at home, followed immediately by gunshots. As she was trying to hide, she heard soldiers talking in French to two young boys who were working in a metal workshop just by the roadside. The soldiers had first burned the workshop while the two boys were hiding inside. The fire began to burn them so they started running out of the burning workshop, where the soldiers caught and questioned them. The witness could manage to hear the soldiers ask, 'where are the boys who shot the explosive down there?' The young boys—apprentices between age 15 and 16—could not understand French and said they didn't know what the soldiers were talking about. The soldiers opened fire and killed the boys. The witness said she could only hear them speak but could not see, as she was afraid of stray bullets.

On the other side of the road, there was the house of an old disabled man, known as Pa Bamboo, who weaved trays, baskets, and chairs using bamboo sticks. The soldiers shot him in the leg and left. The man was crying for help but no one was coming out as everyone had fled when they heard the gunshots. As people were running, businesspersons who retail petrol in containers by the roadside abandoned the petrol and also ran. The military then took the petrol and started using it to burn houses. They moved from house to house along the road, burning and looting valuable property. The man who was shot on the leg finally died due to profuse bleeding. A witness who knew him said she bought a tray from the man the previous Sunday and asked him to make some other trays for her daughter to take to the USA. She was coming to collect them when she heard that the man was shot. People had taken him in a wheelbarrow hoping to get to the hospital, but around Aziri the military had blocked the road and they could not pass, thus the man eventually died.

Cameroon News Agency reported that the IED exploded around 2:00pm, which is consistent with eyewitness accounts. Sunset in Bamenda on December 8 was at 6:05pm Cameroon time. The burnings appear to have continued late into the evening, as the footage shows the fires in progress both before and after dark. The first tweet that mentioned the burnings was posted at 6:50pm Cameroon time.

Perpetrators

From available footage and eyewitness accounts, it is evident that units of the Cameroonian military were responsible for this incident. The footage is not of sufficient quality to identify specific units; however, eyewitness accounts and the Cameroonian government's press release about the attack indicate that the 3rd BIR was implicated in the attacks.

In some of the footage from the incident, narrators of videos identify the BIR as the perpetrators. We note that the BIR often operate with units of the Cameroonian army, and so the possibility that multiple units were involved cannot be ruled out.



A witness told CHRDA that she was in her provision store at about 3:15pm, with her neighbors also in their shops, when they saw three military trucks descending the slope at around Kernel Mill Junction. As they descended, an IED exploded and destroyed one of the vehicles. Immediately, indiscriminate shooting started. Three soldiers, which she says were the BIR, rushed into the witness and her neighbors' shops while shooting and told them to run away. They ran out of the shops and returned the next day to find their shops had been burned down. They also saw the corpses of two boys at a burned metal workshop just beside their shop, and got news that two other corpses were found lying at the junction.

Another witness corroborated the testimony by confirming that it was the BIR, whom she said were returning from a church service program in Mbengwi that she had also attended. According to her, Catholics gathered in Mbengwi for the inauguration of the Our Lady of Fatima at Abangoh, and many security force members, including the BIR and police, were present. Among the soldiers, there was a particular man, guarded by four heavily armed soldiers, and a drone flying over the occasion. Shortly after she left the occasion, she was called and informed of an attack that occurred at around Nitop, Kernel Mill Junction, behind Back Travellers in Bamenda. Videos of the inauguration confirm that members of security forces were present.



Figures 3, 4, and 5: Screenshots of video of shrine inauguration, showing security forces wearing BIR helmets and military personnel





Figures 6 and 7: Screenshots of video of shrine inauguration, showing military personnel

A press release published on December 10 by Navy Captain Cyrille Serge Atonfack Guemo, the Head of Communication Division of the Cameroonian Ministry of Defence, stated that a convoy of the 3rd BIR was subjected to an IED attack in Nitop, Bamenda, at around 3:00pm on December 8. The statement notes that the explosion, which immobilized the convoy, was followed by heavy gunfire. This account has consistencies with the eyewitness statements. The Ministry of Defence statement places members of the 3rd BIR at the scene of the attack. It is highly likely that the 3rd BIR was one of the military units responsible for the subsequent attacks, which is consistent with the eyewitness statements.

It is important to note that the BIR and other military units have lost many soldiers in IED attacks before. While these attacks have often engendered reprisals against the population, the reprisals have never before been on this scale. The Database and CHRDA suspect that, if a senior officer was indeed killed in this IED attack, this ‘exceptional’ reaction was a reaction to that death. We consider the killing of a senior officer or important figure as a high-risk trigger for mass atrocities.

Hospital Attack and Threat

On December 9, Deputy Defense Chief of the ADF Emmanuel Ndong (aka Capo Daniel) shared a video, widely circulated on WhatsApp, in which he confirmed that ADF carried out an attack. He stated that two of their fighters were injured and sought medical care at the St Mary Soledad Catholic Health Center Bamenda. In the video, Ndong shared screenshots of a video call he had with one of the fighters while he was lying on the hospital bed. Then he showed images of the fighter lying on the ground, dead. He stated that the military invaded the hospital, took out the two fighters, and executed them. He then stated he was sending a strong warning to the hospital and the Catholic Church in Bamenda, demanding for a public statement from them within 24 hours on what happened before the military removed the fighters from the hospital and executed them. He said if they fail to comply, the ADF will consider the hospital and Church as agents of the Cameroonian military and be treated as such.



Ministry of Defence Press Release

On December 10, a press release about events in Bamenda was published by Navy Captain Cyrille Serge Atonfack Guemo, the Head of Communication Division of the Cameroonian Ministry of Defence. The release states that:

- a convoy of the 3rd BIR faced a ‘terrorist ambush’ IED attack in Nitop, Bamenda, at around 3:00pm on December 8
- after a violent confrontation, the assailants retreated; one military vehicle was damaged and four separatist fighters were neutralized
- local military officials deployed back-up to secure the area
- rumors about the torching of civilian homes are false machinations and separatist propaganda
- during the gun battle, a hideout in which separatists make IEDs was hit, leading to an explosion that caused a shockwave on a few nearby houses

The scale of the burnings, and the distance between burned structures, as depicted in the geolocation, contradict the Ministry of Defence statement. Video and photo evidence from before and after dark demonstrate that the burnings occurred over a period of time longer than they would have from a single explosion and shockwave. Videos and photos showing cars burned and corpses on the ground indicate broader attacks. All eyewitness statements collected, along with narration of videos of the incident, maintain that members of the military torched civilian homes, thus conflicting with the Ministry of Defence statement.

Conclusion

Our findings confirm that on the evening and night of December 8, 2021, units of the Cameroonian military, including the 3rd BIR and associated forces, conducted wide-scale burnings and some extrajudicial executions of civilians along Mbengwi Road in Bamenda.

****Disclaimer****

As with all Flash Reports, it is important that this analysis is *not considered final*, and it remains subject to change as new information arises.



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Mbengwi Road Burnings, Bamenda (December 2021)



Legend

-  Fire Damaged Areas
-  Incident Area
-  BIR/Military Vehicles
-  Mbengwi Road

This figure was produced by comparing Planet Labs Imagery taken on the 8th and 9th of December. Due to the low resolution of the Planet Labs Imagery, further fire damage is anticipated within the 'Incident Area', but it could not be corroborated by satellite.