

## Resource as a Weapon: Climate Conflict and Ethnic Tensions in Northern Cameroon

### Description

In Northern Cameroon, where the temperature scorches the land and cattle outnumber people, it's not bullets that are destroying livelihoods—it's the lack of resources. Resource scarcity in Cameroon is more than just a climate issue; it is a direct catalyst for intercommunal conflict, displacement, and socio-political instability. Cameroon's Far North region, one of the poorest in the country, is facing escalating violence rooted in environmental degradation, ethnic competition, and institutional fragility. The ongoing crisis demands a radical shift in policy and swift action in both national and international interventions, particularly given the links between climate-related political violence and [irregular warfare](#).

### Climate Stress and Environmental Degradation

The resource conflict in Northern Cameroon is multi-dimensional, driven by environmental, social, and political pressures. As dry seasons extend and rainfall becomes more erratic, access to water becomes more difficult. The Sahel, which includes Northern Cameroon, is heating 1.5 times faster than the global average. The United Nations warns that climate change will render 80% of the farmland in the region unproductive if current trends [persist](#). In the Far North, the Logone River once served as a primary water source for [Musgum fisherfolk and Chao Arab cattle owners](#). The Musgum community tends to dig expansive, labor-intensive basins to retain fish and water during dry seasons. However, these same basins have become a point of contention as Chao Arab pastoralists often find their cattle stuck in these basins, leading to frequent deaths. In 2021, refusal by Musgum fishers to fill the basins led to a series of retaliatory attacks by Chao Arabs, triggering a cycle of communal violence that left over a [100 people dead](#) between August and December.

Environmental degradation exacerbates these tensions. Cameroon lost an estimated [18.1%](#) of its forest cover between 1990 and 2010. Deforestation has reduced access to forest-based livelihoods and forced migration into already-stressed areas. With shrinking forests and drying rivers, populations are squeezed into limited viable zones, intensifying competition for water. Meanwhile, the ecosystem stress is also pushing wildlife to extinction, requiring [armed guards](#) to protect endangered species. Unfortunately, these fragile areas have become havens for Boko Haram activities, whose fighters exploit the instability to smuggle arms, recruit youth, and disrupt humanitarian operations. Clashes

between armed guards and Boko Haram fighters in these areas frequently erupt and escalate the chaos, displacing even more residents into the fragile lands with already depleting water.

## Ethnic Tensions

Cameroon's ethnic diversity, shaped by colonial boundaries and post-independence politics, has historically been a source of cultural wealth. However, economic disparity and political exclusion have increased ethnic tensions, particularly in resource-scarce regions. The conflict between the Chao Arabs and Musgums, two groups that once coexisted near Lake Chad, has morphed from water disputes into a dangerous [ethnic feud](#). Both communities thrived before due to abundant water and fertile land. Today, erratic weather patterns and reduced arable land have forced them into a zero-sum competition. These environmental shocks, combined with limited support from the government, have turned simple disputes over fishing and grazing rights into identity-based conflict. Grievances have deepened, and young men with limited employment prospects are increasingly being mobilized and recruited by community leaders, risking further militarization. Government responses have largely been reactive, favoring military crackdown over conflict resolution. This approach fails to address the [root causes](#) and has alienated many local actors. With the increase of self-defense groups and vigilante militias, justice is often provided through extrajudicial means, perpetuating violence.

These violent episodes are not merely a result of resource scarcity, but they are shaped by identity-based exclusion as well. Government services and political representation are concentrated in urban centers. Ethnic favoritism in local administration and the selective deployment of state security forces have fueled grievances. Moreover, ethnicity in Northern Cameroon is deeply intertwined with livelihood. Being a Musgum often implies a [fishing](#) tradition, while identifying as a Chao Arab or Fulani is linked to [herding](#). This occupational-ethnic identity fusion means that the water disputes are rarely perceived as neutral or technical; they are seen as existential threats to a community's life. The cultural integrity of the groups is at risk, raising the stakes of every local dispute. Political actors have not been neutral bystanders either. At times, [elites](#) have exploited these ethnic troubles, distributing aid and resources along kinship lines or arming militias under the guise of community defense. This dynamic has deepened the divisions and complicated peacebuilding efforts, which often stumble over questions of fairness, representation, and trust.

## The Pastoralist-Farmer Nexus

The pastoralist-farmer nexus in Northern Cameroon represents a volatile fault line in the country's socio-environmental crisis. At its core, the conflict is about resources, mobility, survival and the failure of the state to adapt governance to the realities of climate change and demographic expansion.

Pastoralists and farmers are increasingly struggling over shrinking resources, and the boundaries between seasonal competition and armed conflicts have blurred, fueling cycles of violence. [Historically](#), relations between herders and farmers in Northern Cameroon were characterized by coexistence. Pastoralist groups like the Fulani and Chao Arabs moved their herds seasonally across vast tracts of land through traditional transhumance corridors that spanned Cameroon, Nigeria, Chad, and the Central African Republic. Farmers, meanwhile, cultivated along river banks and seasonal floodplains, benefitting from fertile irrigation and silt. These two systems were interdependent, herders fertilized lands with manure while farmers offered crop residue and access to post-harvest fields. Conflicts were mostly manageable through local mediators and traditional dispute resolution systems.

However, this balance fractured under the combined weight of climate variability, land pressure, political interference, and insecurity. [Rising](#) temperatures and prolonged droughts have decreased pasturelands, dried up water sources, and pushed herders into farming zones. Simultaneously, the [expansion](#) of sedentary agriculture, often driven by state-backed programs, has privatized communal lands, fencing off traditional grazing routes, and turned seasonal mobility into a security liability. The [commercialization](#) of agriculture has further contributed to existing tensions. In the Far North, cash crops such as cotton and sorghum have expanded significantly, with both local elites and agribusinesses acquiring large tracts of fertile land. As land became more commodified, customary land rights, often unregistered and informally held by pastoralists, were overridden. Herders who once had free access to ancestral paths now faced accusations of trespassing, crop destruction and theft. In response, some pastoralists have become more aggressive, travelling with arms, while farmers have begun to organize vigilante patrols to guard their fields. Cross-border dynamics also play a critical role. Northern Cameroon [shares](#) borders with Nigeria and Chad, both of which are dealing with similar pastoralist-farmer conflicts. Transhumance herders often cross national lines with little oversight, and disputes in one country often spill into another.

Cameroon has tried to establish transhumance calendars and map grazing routes, but these policies are often underfunded, poorly communicated, or ignored in practice. The absence of a comprehensive land-use policy has led to ad hoc solutions that fail to prevent violence. Moreover, the security-first approach often alienates communities.

## The Human Impact

The human cost of these conflicts is staggering, creating conditions that could suggest the suitability of [irregular warfare](#). Marginalized or victimized populations may see an increase in the [propensity](#) for violent protest and other forms of political violence, leading to a wide range of potential forms of engagement, including those related to food and economic security. Although the links between severe natural events (climate, weather, and seismic) may have been [overstated](#) in the past, increased natural

event [severity](#), economic vulnerability, and exacerbating factors like [disinformation](#) suggest an increase in potential impact with clear implications for commanders and other leadership, as the human impact in Cameroon illustrates.

The [UNHCR](#) reported that during the 2021 clashes alone, 19 villages were destroyed, displacing 23,500 people. Over 13,000 people fled to Chad. Two months later, only 4,000 people had returned, leaving 9,000 still in displacement. With Cameroon's population being [projected](#) to double by 2050, the demographic pressure is immense. The need to increase agricultural output to meet food demand is urgent, but conflict and climate variability threaten the entire country's [food security](#). With farmlands abandoned, livestock lost, and markets disrupted, hunger is spreading faster. The conflict disrupts the local economy, deterring investment and trade. Due to [insecurity](#), the necessary infrastructure is also difficult to develop for the immediate communities and the broader regional economy.

Education and healthcare services are also [collapsing](#) under the strain, particularly for women and children. Gender dynamics are often overlooked but are deeply significant in this scope of resource conflict. Women in the farming community are usually responsible for weeding, harvesting, and food processing. In the pastoralist groups, women handle milk production, child-rearing and trading. Violence disrupts these roles, often resulting in sexual violence and increased burdens of unpaid care work. Yet these women are [rarely](#) consulted in peacebuilding dialogues or land management decisions, perpetuating gendered violence.

The conflict has also deepened ethnic and cultural divisions, eroding trust between the communities, creating further vulnerability to irregular warfare that requires both security attention today and analysis by relevant command communities to understand the risks and [challenges](#) they may face when engaging in such environments in vulnerable communities. In Cameroon, traditional systems for conflict resolution have weakened due to the ongoing conflict and erosion of trust, a further signal of deeper conflict susceptibility. The [trauma](#) that results from persistent violence, displacement, and loss has significantly psychologically affected the population of the region. [Children](#) are vulnerable to the long-term consequences of such trauma, which can affect their development and well-being. [Mental health services](#) are not available in these fragile regions, leaving many of them to cope without necessary support. Moreover, the interruption in children's education has increased complications for literacy rates and human capital development.

## What needs to change

Since 2020, there has been a sporadic number of clashes between the Chao Arab and Musgum communities, and they have become more segregated than before. [Data](#) showed that there were thirty-

one communal violence in the region between 2022 and 2023. Authorities monitor these conflicts and track how they progress, but little has been done to address the underlying causes of these violent outbursts. Currently, the government encourages peacebuilding between religious and traditional leaders in the community, but these initiatives have fizzled out. There have been tendencies for various meetings to be cancelled because of the fear that they might make the situation worse. Members of the Chao Arab and Musgum communities are mostly [displaced](#), and those who have returned live mostly in their own communities. It has become urgent to address these issues more comprehensively to prevent large-scale violence.

Local government and the Cameroonian government should collaboratively work in implementing [early warning committees](#) in all affected areas. These committees will include women and the youth, who would ideally help manage ethnic tensions, mediate smaller disputes, and inform the local authorities of any major threats. It is key that these committees have representatives from all parties to the conflict, as that would ensure transparency and build trust.

The members of the committees also need to be [trained](#) in dispute resolution and best practices. Institutions like the United Nations can help build and fund this training program. Furthermore, preventative measures should also include mitigating and tackling climate stressors that contribute to the violence. The government should develop an alert system monitoring major climate-related issues that could provide information to fisherfolk, cattle-owners, and farmers in the region regarding temperature, water reserves, precipitation, and food reserves. This would enable them to act accordingly when sudden climate-related changes happen in the region without the risk of a violent outbreak.

The continuation of international aid and relief is optimal as the region already suffers from extreme poverty and a water crisis. Ensuring security and social infrastructure in this area would encourage better dissemination of relief by international partners. The government has been [designing](#) projects to help ease the water scarcity in the region. This is an opportunity to include specific actions that will remedy the issue, such as clearly specifying demarcated pastures, drilling boreholes on land set aside for that specific use, and developing regulations for digging basins near the Logone River. The authorities can include environmental experts to contribute their opinion on the best way to develop the region.

On a national level, the government needs to undertake a more effective approach to [resource management](#). For example, existing water management committees need fairer representation of the communities in Northern Cameroon. The government can include international donors and NGOs to help develop the town councils and train local officials with inclusive approaches to development. The government should also incorporate more realistic ways to address the [regulatory shortcomings](#) in law

and practice in the region. There should be a simple and effective process for residents to file complaints and trust that these complaints will be handled justly, especially with land ownership. Additionally, starting a thorough and transparent investigation into past violent events and conducting fair and quick trials for alleged perpetrators can help restore people's trust and rights.

## Conclusion

Cameroon's Northern region is struggling due to conflict and drastic climate effects, triggering violence over all available resources, including water and land. As the communities are fighting to survive, the violence is worsening. The Chao Arab and Musgum conflict is an example of how complex and multifaceted these communal violences are. As climate change intensifies existing conflicts, the government must adopt a dual approach, enhancing conflict response capacities while implementing long-term strategies to mitigate climatic impacts. However, the effort must be inclusive and collaborative, as local authorities cannot handle these issues alone; rather, the national government and its international partners should act together to address the roots and prevent future violence.

In the irregular warfare community, the lessons to commanders and military leadership are striking. The combination of internal violence, external climate threats, and scarcity of precious resources creates a volatile environment that could come to characterize the future of military engagement, with irregular warfare capabilities becoming increasingly important. Responding to localized violence with economic support, food aid, and security planning that favors [survival and a transition](#) (over time) to resilience will become far more important than simply navigating the nuances of armed conflict among preexisting suffering. Cameroon shows how conflict is changing and suggests how irregular warfare will need to adapt and evolve beyond kinetic engagement.

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