

THE BAKASSI CRISIS: THE ROLE OF THE NIGERIAN AND CAMEROONIAN MILITARY, 1981-2013

Henry KAM KAH

Abstract. *This paper examines the role played by the Nigerian and Cameroonian military in exacerbating and/or mitigating the crisis over ownership of the Bakassi peninsula prior to and after the ruling of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at The Hague in 2002. Faced with internal challenges and determined to keep Bakassi to either side, the military of both countries committed atrocities, while lives and properties were also lost in the process. The same military also contributed to the peaceful transfer of the entire oil and fish rich peninsula to the Republic of Cameroon. From 1981, when the first conflict was recorded in the peninsula, between the Cameroonian and Nigerian forces, to 2008, when the final transfer of the territory to Cameroon was done, and after, there was sustained tension between the forces of both countries for different reasons. Their role was also compounded by the militant activities of armed groups from the Nigerian side, determined to keep the territory under Nigeria. This paper reveals, through a content analysis of some of the literature available, that both the Nigerian and Cameroonian military carried out their activities in the Bakassi peninsula determined by internal and external forces.*

Keywords: *Bakassi, Nigeria, Cameroon, military, crisis.*

Introduction

Africa is a continent of both peace and conflicts – both internal and external. Several countries have experienced these conflicts within their borders and this has impacted the foundation established at their independence. In many of these internal conflicts, the military has been embroiled for or against the state and the population. Among countries that have been and are still riddled with internal problems with the military playing a decisive role are Nigeria,

Henry KAM KAH, PhD
University of Buea, Cameroon
Email: kamkohkah@gmail.com

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Sierra Leone, Liberia, Uganda, Malawi, Cote d'Ivoire, Sudan, South Sudan, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Somalia, Angola, Mali, the Central African Republic (CAR) and the Republic of Congo (Tvedten, 1989; Bongartz, 1991; Bigombe, 1993; Weiss, 2000; Abdullah, 2004; Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2004; Agbu, 2004; Akindes, 2004; Chirambo, 2004; Kirwin, 2006; Tar, 2006; Conteh-Morgan, 2006; Courson, 2009; Bere, 2011; Obuoforibo, 2011; Otite, 2011; Ibaba, 2011; Bamidele, 2012; Lindberg, 2012-2013). These conflicts have often involved the military either fighting against itself as is the case in South Sudan, barely two years after independence, and the Central African Republic (CAR), a state that has known instability since its independence.

While the political crisis in South Sudan, which began in December 2013, was a result of the struggle for leadership of the country between Riek Machar, the sacked Vice President, and Salva Kiir, the incumbent president, leading to the polarisation of the military, the situation in the CAR is even worse. There is a group of disgruntled soldiers and other armed groups who toppled a government and took over leadership of the country. In 2010, Cote d'Ivoire was also buried in an internal crisis over contested election results between the president Alassane Dramani Ouattara and former president Laurent Gbagbo. Other countries, like Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Uganda, and Mali, have invested huge resources for their military to handle the insurgency – people were seeking to overthrow the government and take over the mantle of leadership. The role of the military with regards to the integrity of the state has been outstanding and needs to be appreciated.

Apart from intra-state conflicts, there are conflicts of an inter-state nature. Some of these conflicts are generated from one country and spread to other countries. Others erupt due to a boundary dispute between neighbouring countries. These boundaries are a product of European scramble and partition of Africa. Examples of conflicts which spread beyond national borders include the *Boko Haram* and *Ansaru* insurgency in Nigeria and neighbouring countries, the *Janjaweed* atrocities in Sudan and neighbours, *Al-Shabaab* militant activities in Sudan and East Africa, insurgency of the Lords' Resistance Army in Uganda and other countries in the region, AQIM in Mali, and the M23 in the DRC (Vehnämäki, 2002; Fawole and Ukeje, 2005; Hendricks and Lushaba, 2005; Salih, 2011; Meyer, 2011; Nkwi, 2013; Onuoha, 2013; Okereke, 2013). In these conflicts, the military have been involved to suppress them, to protect national borders and assist civilian victims.

There have also been border disputes in some African countries, which lasted for many years. Some of the conflicts which lasted for many years were those between Ethiopia and Eritrea, which culminated in the independence of Eritrea. Botswana and Namibia also went to war over their border between 1984 and 1999. Similarly, Chad and Libya were at war over their border between 1972 and 1994, and Cameroon and Nigeria clashed several times with casualties on both sides over the Bakassi peninsula, between

1981 and 2008 (Pacific Settlement of Border Disputes, 2008). In all these border conflicts, the patience of the military was tested with some of them paying the supreme price, added to the loss of other lives and property.

In many of these conflicts, attention was focused on the leaders of the countries involved. The role of the military was either relegated to the background, or treated as footnotes in conflicts and conflict resolution. When mention has been made of the role of the military, it has often been to castigate them for fuelling the conflict. In spite of the role the military have played in exacerbating conflicts, they have also played other important functions for their country. For example, they have been involved in intelligence gathering, support for victims, and in the application of decisions taken by their leaders. The information collected has often assisted leaders in taking decisions by reducing conflict or intensifying them.

Rather than relegating it to the background, this paper examines the pivotal role of the Nigerian and Cameroonian military during the Bakassi crisis between 1981 and 2013. The paper then gives credence to the role of the military of both countries beginning with the refusal by the military governments of Nigeria from the mid 1970s to recognise the borders between Cameroon and Nigeria as agreed upon by President Ahmadou Ahidjo and Yakubu Gowon during the Maroua Accord of 1975. In the Bakassi conflict the military of both countries defended the position of their respective countries, protected their citizens in the peninsula and offered assistance to those who were exposed during the battles. In addition, the military respected the ICJ ruling which called on Nigerian troops to withdraw from the Bakassi peninsula. Cameroonian forces were warned to exercise restraint throughout the period of transfer of authority to Cameroon of Bakassi. This rule was, however, broken from time to time. The insurgency of armed groups outside the state apparatus in Bakassi were and are still being monitored thanks to the presence of the military in this region. The deliberate undermining of the causes of the skirmishes and casualties was also common on both sides. This was a military strategy and was certainly intended to control the anger of the population of both countries. The extent to which the military of both countries achieved this is a subject of further research. It also took the professionalism and commitment of Nigerian forces to respect the timetable set for their withdrawal in the Bakassi peninsula.

Conflicts and Military Involvement

The military have been at the centre of trying to bring the array of conflicts in Africa to an end. Their involvement in intra or inter-state conflicts has either compounded or lessened the problems. In fact, the military are involved in the politics of its country directly or indirectly (Leon, 2009) at all times, and this involvement influences the approach of the leadership to political issues and in the management of conflicts. A lot has been written conceptualising the romance between the military and conflicts all

over the world. In this study, our focus is on those concepts or theories that help us to understand the complexity of the Bakassi conflict between Cameroon and Nigeria and the role that the military of both countries played in this conflict.

Mehler (2004: 539-44) conceptualises violence in sub-Saharan Africa in terms of oligopolies. To this author, oligopolies comprise a fluctuating number of partly competing, and partly cooperating, actors of violence of different quality. In oligopolies of violence, governance is based on a mixture of real repression and permanent readiness to negotiate. In territorial oligopolies, agents of violence may find relatively stable arrangements to attribute zones of control inside states and exert a monopoly of violence there. With regards to the oligopoly of violence, there is the distribution of means of violence to a limited number of perpetrators. There is relevance of the concept of oligopolies of violence to the conduct of the Bakassi conflict between Cameroon and Nigeria. In the peninsula there were and are still groups competing for control and exclusion of the other. Apart from the Cameroon and Nigerian military presence in the area, other armed militant groups have tried to carve out spheres of influence for themselves to the exclusion of the Nigerian and Cameroonian military. The unwillingness of these competing groups to sue for peace or dialogue with the other is what Mateos (2010: 25) describes as primordialist views in conflict situations.

Another set of theories which seem to relate to the reality in the conflict over Bakassi are those of realism, liberalism, and elite interests, as discussed by Lieberfeld (2005: 3-7) in trying to unravel the basis of the American involvement in the Iraq war, one of the most costly for that country after the Vietnam War. Realism relates to those aspects of foreign policy of a country that remain consistent over time. The concept places an emphasis on continuity and also the inevitability of military competition. Leaders opt for war when they believe it necessary for national security. Lieberfeld also examines the concept of liberalism where the decision to go to war is based on the internal characteristics of a country particularly the type of government in place and also on international law. Again he examines the concept of elite interests in conflicts. Elite interests get centre stage when the actions of the political and economic elites affect the decisions involving the military and war. This is a Marxist perspective which argues that external wars are fomented by the bourgeoisie to control new markets. This is also to protect its class dominance by deflecting socio-economic pressures from the workers.

In the three concepts proposed by Lieberfeld, one can establish a link with the crisis that erupted over the Bakassi peninsula between Cameroon and Nigeria. Cameroon's policy on the border demarcation with Nigeria has remained consistent from the presidency of Ahmadou Ahidjo to that of Paul Biya. In meetings and agreements with the Nigerian leadership, Cameroon's position was always clear, that is, Bakassi was Cameroonian territory. Even when the military regimes of Nigeria tried to claim Bakassi as Nigeria's territory, this did not stop the Cameroon government from holding tight to the position

taken when it gained its independence and reunification. Nigeria, on the other hand, was not consistent until convinced to accept the verdict of the ICJ in 2002. This is however still being questioned by some political elite in Nigeria, partly to keep their interest and divert public attention from the vexing problem of the *Boko Haram* insurgency which is trying to undermine the authority of the state and other socio-religious conflicts in the country. Cameroon was also involved in military conflicts in the Bakassi peninsula to placate Anglophones who are disgruntled with the state of the union. These concepts notwithstanding, a particular methodology was used to analyse the issues involved in this study.

Methodology of Study

In this paper, the methodology of content analysis of works on or related to Bakassi has been employed. I have also tried to analyse the statements made by Nigerian and Cameroonian military authorities and their influence on the course of events and death of many people even if the figures were not uniform on both sides involved in the conflict. I also analysed media coverage of the conflict as seen through the eyes of the Nigerian and Cameroonian press. Several authors, both Cameroonian and Nigerian, analysed the conflict from diverse, and, in some cases, from complementary angles. Although most of the works discussed skirmishes between Cameroonian and Nigerian military in the Bakassi peninsula, these works did not go further to discuss in greater detail how these clashes contributed to the resolution of the conflict. Neither did they explain why even after its resolution, clashes continued; even if they were not directly related to the military, they pulled the military in to restore order and create harmonious coexistence among the people of the Bakassi peninsula.

The Bakassi Peninsula and Context of Military Activities

The Bakassi peninsula is a border area between Cameroon and Nigeria located at the southern end leading into the Atlantic Ocean. It is part of a 1,700 kilometre border between the two countries, one of the longest borders in Africa. Bakassi lies roughly between latitudes 4°25 and 5°10 N and longitudes 8°20 and 9°08 E. It consists of low-lying mangrove-covered islands in an area of about 665 km. It is situated at the eastern end of the Gulf of Guinea (Mbagha and Ngo, 7). Half of the mangrove is submerged as it protrudes into the Bight of Bonny (Babatola, 2012: 85).

The military clashes in Bakassi that started in 1981 were influenced by leaders of both countries. They used the crisis to divert attention from internal pressures and grievances of their people. The military leaders of Nigeria, notably Babangida and Abacha, were under pressure at home and abroad to introduce democracy and multiparty politics in Nigeria, which had for a greater part of its independence been ruled by the military after the 1966 *coup d'état*. The Nigerian government was also criticised for executing Ken

Saro Wiwa and other activists for protesting against the exploitation of oil in Ogoniland without a corresponding development of the area. Above all, the annulment of the 1993 elections in which Moshood Abiola was widely acclaimed to have won, challenged the authority of the government of Abacha. As a way of rallying the country towards a common destiny amidst these grievances, Abacha mobilised his forces towards Bakassi and insisted that Bakassi was not Cameroonian territory.

In Cameroon, following the re-introduction of multiparty politics through the launching of the Social Democratic Front (SDF) Party in Bamenda on May 26, 1990, the national media accused Nigeria of instigating illegal demonstrations in Bamenda and the University of Yaoundé and of seeking to incite popular revolt. It also reported that the Nigerian anthem was sung by the protesting Anglophone students. The Nigerian media retorted arguing that Nigerians in Cameroon were being systematically harassed, detained, tortured, or murdered by Cameroonian security forces. The Cameroonian government was scared by growing militantism for Anglophone autonomy at a time when it was pursuing the Bakassi peninsula located within Anglophone territory in Cameroon. In a crackdown on this militantism, many Nigerians were also forced to return to Nigeria due to the harassing tax drive. Bamenda was also placed under a state of emergency after the contested 1992 presidential elections. Many of its inhabitants were subjected to all forms of human rights abuse (Ngoh, 2001). In the midst of these internal grievances, the Cameroon government intensified its military build-up in the Bakassi peninsula, which resulted in several conflicts in the area in the 1990s.

The increase in tension and conflicts between the Nigerian and Cameroonian military in the Bakassi peninsula was fuelled by reports that the area was extremely rich in diverse marine resources as well as by the discovery of huge deposits of crude oil and gas reserves (The Intractability, 2013; Baye, 10-11; Aghemelo and Ibhasebhor, 2006: 177). Neither Cameroon nor Nigeria was prepared to forfeit those riches of the Bakassi peninsula and increased their military presence in the area for effective occupation prior to the ICJ after Cameroon submitted the case to court on March 29, 1994. After the 2002 ICJ ruling, there was growing unease among residents of the Bakassi peninsula, who accused the Cameroonian military officials, especially gendarmes posted to work in the peninsula, of maltreating them. The many reports from them to local government authorities in the Cross River State brought the Nigerian military close to Bakassi even after their official withdrawal in 2008. The open confrontation that began between the military of Cameroon and Nigeria was against a background of leaders of both countries using it to boost their popularity at home and abroad.

Military Clashes, 1981 to 1996

Prior to the May 15-16, 1981, military conflict in the Bakassi peninsula between Cameroonian and Nigerian forces, there had been a determined effort by the military leaders of Nigeria to undermine the Maroua Accord between Ahidjo and Gowon

and to paint Gowon black for ceding Nigerian territory to Cameroon. General Murtala Muhammad and his successor, General Olusegun Obasanjo, denied or were unwilling to respect the border agreement and this created tension between Cameroon and Nigeria. Even after Shehu Shagari took over the leadership of Nigeria as a civilian ruler, the tension did not dissipate but it rather escalated into an open conflict.

The May 15-16, 1981, military clash in the Bakassi peninsula was a result of the failure by Nigeria to recognise that Bakassi was owned by Cameroon although effective occupation of the area for a long period had been by Nigerians, most of them fishermen. The skirmish was between a fast attack craft of the Nigerian police and a detachment of Cameroon's marines in the Rio-del-Rey. According to a Nigerian version, the 1981 incident was triggered by Cameroonian soldiers who ambushed Nigerian soldiers in three boats and killed five of them within their own territorial waters in the Bakassi peninsula (Omoigui, not dated). They argued that Nigerian soldiers were in the area to protect Nigerians, most of whom fishermen, from the Cameroonian gendarmes who were imposing high taxes on them (Okonkwo, 2009: 29). The Cameroonian version was that the incident of 1981 was triggered by Nigerian soldiers who crossed their territorial waters into the Rio-del-Rey and opened fire on the Cameroonian navy although Nigeria refuted this. The leadership of Nigeria argued that its soldiers were on the AkwaYafe when they were attacked by the Cameroonian navy. In the attack, the Cameroon navy killed five Nigerian soldiers (Omoigui, not dated).

The views about the cause of the military skirmish in May 1981 are conflicting and call for further interrogation. If the Nigerian military were in the area to protect its citizens from being over-taxed by the Cameroonian gendarmes, then they crossed the border without permission from the Cameroonian authorities and it was to show that Bakassi was not Cameroonian territory. Conversely, if the Nigerian soldiers were crafting a fast attack, this was not just for the sake of it but to either provoke or attack the Cameroonian navy stationed there. On the other hand, the Cameroon navy argued that the Nigerian military violated the boundary by moving into the Rio-del-Rey estuary; the government of Cameroon eventually apologised to Nigeria in July 1981 and supported the families of the victims. The Cameroon navy should be blamed for being the aggressor and not the Nigerian military. Again, the decision of the Cameroon government might have been not to hold on indefinitely in the face of superior Nigerian forces as was alleged by Iyob (2008: 32) when Cameroon referred the conflict to the ICJ. One may also argue that it was a diplomatic move to ease tension between Cameroon and Nigeria after the death of the five Nigerian soldiers, without Cameroon necessarily taking responsibility for the attack. Whatever the case, the incident of May 1981 was just the beginning of the many conflicts that followed.

The 1981 incident was inconclusive and continued under military rulers of Nigeria, notably General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, who was considered the "Maradona"

of Nigerian politics and his successor Sani Abacha and Ahidjo's successor Paul Biya. As if the killing of five Nigerians was not enough in May 1981, Cameroonian gendarmes occupied again, in May 1987, 16 border villages in Borno State in the North and were only forced out by the Nigerian army units. This incident made the Nigerian government to instruct all the State governors "to take military reprisals against any belligerent neighbouring country" (Oluda, 2011). This was an apparent reference to Cameroon. It was only after the visit of President Babangida to Cameroon in December that year that the simmering tension between the military of the two countries dissipated. Two years later, that is, in October 1989, Cameroonian gendarmes were said to have abducted four Nigerian custom officials on routine patrol at the border (Oluda, 2011). The same year, a Nigerian flag was reportedly hoisted at Jabane, some 6 kilometres into Cameroonian territory. It was removed on the instructions of Major Oyono, who was in charge of the Cameroon military in the Bakassi area at the time. Three weeks later, a signboard was found in the area indicating that the area was Nigerian territory (Atim, 2011: 52). In spite of these provocative incidents, the Nigerian military in the first instance did not further compound problems and in the second, the Cameroonian military also handled the matter professionally.

The first six years of the 1990s were eventful in military attacks and counter attacks in the Bakassi peninsula. On December 21, 1993, Nigerian forces invaded Bakassi and immediately incorporated it into the Federated States of Akwalbom and Cross River (Vanguard, 2013; Issaka and Kapinga, 2008: 2). In response, Cameroonian troops attacked the village of Abana in Nigeria. This resulted in the death of 6 persons. Infuriated by this, Nigerian troops occupied the Cameroonian islands of Diamond and Djabane on January 3, 1994 (Atim, 2011: 52). Other raids were carried out by the Cameroonian military near the Bakassi peninsula between January 19 and February 8, 1994. These raids led to over 22,000 Nigerian refugees fleeing the area. Clashes between Cameroonian and Nigerian troops continued on February 18-19, 1994, in a show of strength and commitment to hold on to strategic bases in the Bakassi peninsula. This skirmish led to the death of 1 Cameroonian soldier and 30 Nigerian soldiers. These series of clashes made the government of Cameroon to request and receive military assistance from France. This was in keeping with military accords signed with France after the independence of French speaking Cameroon on January 1, 1960. France sent 2 helicopters and 30 troops to Yaoundé on February 27, 1994, to assist the Cameroonian military. The tussle for Bakassi raged on, and on September 18, 1994, 10 Cameroonian soldiers lost their lives in defence of the country in the Bakassi peninsula. Following the casualties on both sides resulting from the border incursions in the Bakassi peninsula between 1993 and 1994, the Cameroon government submitted the matter to the ICJ for adjudication on March 29, 1994 (Baye, 11; Oluda, 2011).

Explanations have been given to support the argument of Nigeria's deployment of thousands of troops on the Bakassi peninsula in the 1990s. According to Africa Confidential and other sources, the decision of Nigeria "to deploy a thousand troops on the [Bakassi] peninsula was in turn a reaction to the harassment of Nigerian fishing vessels and traders by Cameroon Gendarmes". Nigerian troops took several islands by storm in the Bakassi peninsula in an apparent attempt to reaffirm Abuja's resolve to build military bases, schools, and clinics in the area. (Tansa, 1996; Issaka and Kapinga, 2008: 4). The Cameroonian attacks between 1993 and 1994 were more or less retaliatory and provocative. Throughout the period of the Bakassi crisis, Nigerian citizens always decried the overzealousness and brutality of Cameroonian gendarmes. The gendarmes are a French force in Francophone Africa and were accused of brutality on Anglophone Cameroonians after the 1961 reunification. One must also note that the reign of Abacha in Nigeria was considered by many outside and perhaps within that country as the reign of terror. Unlike other leaders before him, who were involved in diplomatic discussions to resolve the crisis in the Bakassi peninsula, Abacha was an uncompromising leader and would go at any length to keep Bakassi under Nigerian control. The Nigerian military in the Bakassi peninsula was, under his leadership, as uncompromising as that of Cameroon. Weary of the hostilities, counter hostilities, loss of human lives, and destruction of property, Cameroon referred the matter to the ICJ at The Hague, Netherlands. Nigerian authorities accused the country of not handling the matter locally.

Whatever other arguments were raised by Nigeria to support its military incursions in Bakassi in the 1990s, there were utterances by some of its top military personnel that the country would lose if it gave up the Bakassi peninsula to Cameroon. Some Nigerian naval officers told Reuters that the loss of Bakassi would cause severe strategic problems for the Nigerian Navy because it would render the naval base at Calabar useless. One of them said that "if we lose Bakassi, we lose our eastern access to the Atlantic. Our naval ships cannot move freely to Southern Africa, for instance, without Cameroon's approval". While arguments of gendarme brutality were raised time and again and should not be readily dismissed, the strategic location of Bakassi alone was enough reason to cause the Nigerian military to reject calls to cede Bakassi to Cameroon. The peninsula was needed to provide access to the Atlantic from the country's eastern flank.

The year 1994 was a turning point in the crisis over the Bakassi peninsula between Cameroon and Nigeria. Cameroon resorted to the force of argument and not the argument of force when it submitted a complaint with the ICJ over the ownership of Bakassi. It was also thanks to the good sense of President Olusegun Obasanjo to come to terms with reality and accept that Bakassi was Cameroonian territory. Although Cameroon took the matter to the ICJ for ruling, hostilities between the military of both countries continued even after the verdict of the court in 2002. The Yaoundé military authorities argued that the events of February 16-17, 1996, military and counter military

attacks in the Bakassi peninsula were triggered by the surprise attack of Cameroonian forces by Nigerian commandos beginning on February 3rd. They inflicted heavy losses on Cameroonian units, driving the Cameroonian forces to retreat (Tansa, 1996). Acknowledging the Nigerian attack and the impact it had on the Cameroonian soldiers, a senior military official in Yaoundé was quoted to have said that:

Our boys were taken unawares as they watched a football match over television, but they fought gallantly to defend their positions and were only forced to retreat after running out of ammunition. We have been deceived by the commitment of both Nigerian and Cameroonian authorities to await the verdict of the International Court of Justice into going into slumber. This was without counting with the bad faith of our enemy. Nigeria must not take our leniency and respect for the judicial process with the International Court of Justice in The Hague as a sign of weakness. We will show them that we will fight and fight until we regain our territory (Tansa, 1996).

Cameroonian soldiers thought that the commitment of the leaders of the two countries and the adjudication of the ICJ on the ownership of Bakassi would bring about a respite in hostilities, but they were mistaken. If the so-called explanation by the military officials was to be taken seriously, then Nigerian troops could be accused of bad faith when they attacked Cameroonian bases without waiting for the ICJ verdict. In spite of this, Cameroonian soldiers can be faulted for unprofessionalism at the battle ground. They were supposed to be alert at all times. They failed to understand that the ICJ could rule on the case but did not have the jurisdiction to enforce its rulings. Again, how could men in uniform at the war front run out of ammunition quickly, with an impending onslaught from an enemy force? Someone somewhere did not do their job and the soldiers ran out of ammunition too soon. How could soldiers all gather to watch a match without adequate safeguards for their security and the territory they were out to protect? In fact, it was likely not leniency and respect for Nigerian troops that forced the Cameroonian forces to retreat but rather their ill-preparedness to strike when they were taken by surprise. They should not have been taken by surprise in the first place because they deployed to Bakassi not to watch games or to respect and be lenient to the Nigerian military, but to secure Bakassi for Cameroon.

Although the Cameroonian military can be blamed for the military reversals of February 16-17, 1996, it was the Nigerian forces that were the aggressors. Their attack was a demonstration of the determination to inflict more casualties on the Cameroonians and probably force Cameroon to withdraw the case from the ICJ. This was not because like the senior military personnel in Yaoundé quipped, as the Cameroonian troops would fight to the very end to ensure that Cameroon legally controlled Bakassi.

As Cameroonian military authorities cried foul against the Nigerian military devastating blow, the Nigerian military official Brigadier Fred Chijuka, Director of Defence

Information, denied that other conflicts had erupted besides the February 3, 1996 skirmishes. He accused Cameroonians of whipping up sentiments to justify their aggression on Nigerians. These military attacks of February 1996 forced many Cameroonians living in the peninsula to escape to safety (Tansa, 1996). When these incidents of February 1996 took place, Cameroon's Ministry of External Relations issued a press statement. According to the press statement, Cameroon lost only one soldier, but the military authorities claimed that the casualty figures were higher. While the Nigerian military and Cameroon's Ministry of External Relations played down the severity of the attack, the defence officials in Cameroon acknowledged its great consequences. Whatever interpretation was made of these clashes, there was an unprovoked attack by the Nigerian military and condemnation of it by the Cameroonian government and military officials. The Cameroonian military, however, declared its commitment to retaliate in the future. This attack, after Cameroon had submitted the case to the ICJ, made the court in a ruling of 12 to 5 votes on March, 15, 1996, to ask Cameroon and Nigeria to ensure that the presence of any armed forces in the Bakassi peninsula did not extend beyond the positions they had prior to February 3, 1996, when the first attack took place (Summary of the Summary, 1996; Kamto, 2008: 15).

Considering that both parties were stuck to their position of keeping Bakassi at any cost, on May 3-6, 1996, another skirmish broke out between these forces. The Nigerian Defence Headquarters reported that long-range artillery, helicopter gunships and gunboats had been used and diplomats said that 50 Nigerian soldiers were killed and a number of them taken prisoners. No information was available on the Cameroonian casualties. The Nigerian Foreign Minister Chief Tom Ikimi also said that Cameroon's foreign partners, without actually naming them, might have urged the country to attack Nigeria (Nigeria and Cameroon Clash, 1996: 5). When corpses of Nigerian soldiers were taken home, some Nigerian soldiers, in outrage, disguised as onion merchants, opened fire on the Cameroon patrol team at the border killing several soldiers. Cameroon claimed that only two of its soldiers were killed in this incident. Other minor clashes between the Nigerian and Cameroonian military took place prior to the 2002 ICJ ruling. One of them was on November 23, 1997; it led to the death of 1 Cameroonian soldier. Then, between February 23 and 25, 1998, the clashes led to the death of 7 Cameroonian soldiers. Between October 12 and 14, 2000, Cameroonian forces attacked several Nigerian villages in the border region and the result was the death of several individuals. The following year, between May and June, Nigerian soldiers retaliated by invading three localities in Bakassi (Atim, 2011: 54).

Generally speaking, common sense would have required that Cameroonian and Nigerian troops wait for the outcome of the ICJ case over Bakassi submitted to it by Cameroon in 1994 but this was not to be. Conflicts erupted time and again between 1996 and 2001, with consequences beyond expectations. The court ruling in 2002 did not stop

Nigerian and Cameroonian troops from clashing in and around the Bakassi peninsula, or other armed groups from rebelling.

Role of the Military, 2002 to 2013

The year 2002 marked another milestone in the struggle over the Bakassi peninsula between Cameroon and Nigeria. The ICJ ruled the case over Bakassi on October 10, 2002, in favour of Cameroon, among other landmark decisions concerning the border between Cameroon and Nigeria. In keeping with the spirit of the ICJ ruling, the Secretary General of the United Nations, Koffi Atta Annan arranged for another meeting between Presidents Paul Biya and Olusegun Obasanjo in Geneva, Switzerland, on November 15, 2002. During this meeting, leaders of both countries agreed to establish the Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission (CNMC) to “consider ways of following up on the ICJ ruling and moving the process forward” (Mashood and Kapinga, 2008: 2-3). Four years later, the implementation of the ICJ ruling was launched, including plans for signing of an agreement at Greentree, New York. The timetable for the handover of the Bakassi peninsula was agreed to take place by June 2008, including the treatment of local populations. Nigeria would maintain a presence in 18% of the territory for two years, ending in June 2008 (Mashood and Kapinga, 2008: 3).

Following the ICJ ruling and the steps that were taken for a successful transfer of authority from Nigeria to Cameroon, one would have thought that the skirmishes of the 1990s would give way to reason and restraint on both military sides, but this was not the case. Matters were further compounded by the activities of militant groups in the Bakassi peninsula, by the provocative acts of Nigerian military, and by overzealousness and impatience on behalf of the Cameroonian forces. The military activities of Cameroon and Nigeria were also determined by the commitment not to derail the peaceful process of handover of Bakassi. While some clashes were a result of selfishness, others were an attempt to stop other forces from torpedoing the peace process.

An early sign of a military clash between Cameroon and Nigeria over the Bakassi peninsula was on June 21, 2005. Nigerian troops fired rocket-propelled grenades at Cameroon security posts, killing one Cameroonian soldier (Tarlebba and Baroni, 2010: 206). No immediate reason was given for this attack, but from the looks of things, this might have been an attempt to torpedo the peaceful process of the transfer of the Bakassi peninsula to Cameroon, which had been agreed by the two leaders to begin in 2006 and end in June 2008. It might also have been overzealousness on the part of those who launched the attack. Having weapons and not using them was like idling in the peninsula, and the only way to use the stockpile of weapons was to foment problems and then justify their use against Cameroon military targets.

This military attack, however, did not prevent leaders of Cameroon and Nigeria from pursuing the ICJ ruling and the Greentree Agreement of November 2002. On August 1,

2006, the Nigerian military played a momentous role in the peaceful resolution of the Bakassi crisis. Some 3,000 troops began to withdraw, and on August 14 of the same year, a ceremony marked the formal handover of the northern part of the Bakassi peninsula to Cameroon. This withdrawal received appreciation from the presidency of Cameroon. The Secretary General at the Presidency praised the Nigerian government for the sense of understanding to have respected the calendar for the transfer of Bakassi to Cameroon (Yaoundé Commends, 2006). After the withdrawal of Nigerian troops, the Cameroon flag was hoisted to show effective occupation of the area vacated by the Nigerian military (Baye, 11; Niger-Thomas, 2011: 55).

In spite of these positive signs of a peaceful transfer of authority to Cameroon over the Bakassi peninsula, an incident on November 12, 2007, threatened the success of this process. Unidentified gunmen launched a string of attacks against Cameroonian troops in parts of the territory already ceded to Cameroon. In their first assault using speed boats, twenty-one Cameroonian soldiers lost their lives at Iking, and the assailants got away with some military equipment and ammunition (Mbachu, 2008; Atim, 2011: 55). This attack did not seriously affect the transfer of territory to Cameroon. The Nigerian military had committed to the transfer of the territory by vacating the northern part of the territory, as per the Greentree Agreement between the two countries. Disgruntled elements within the Bakassi peninsula and other groups in Nigeria had taken advantage of this to create confusion, but Cameroon exercised patience and the Nigerian military was vigilant not to allow any sectarian group in Nigeria to create unnecessary tension between Cameroonians and Nigerians living in the Bakassi peninsula.

In keeping its commitment to the successful resolution of the conflict, the Nigerian military blamed armed militants fighting in the nearby oil-rich Niger Delta. This blame was rejected by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) through its spokesperson Jomo Gbomo, who accused the Nigerian military of the attack, out of anger that Cameroonian troops had ignored weapons deliveries received by the movement through the estuary by Bakassi (Mbachu, 2008). The blame and counter blame notwithstanding, the Nigerian military had come to terms with the hard reality and decided to commit itself to it. Since the armed groups were against the state of Nigeria over oil proceeds, they could foment further problems between Cameroon and Nigeria in order to benefit in the process.

The armed attacks did not dissipate. In early June 2008, six Cameroonians, including five soldiers and a local administrator namely Fonya Felix Morfaw were killed in a similar attack at the Akwa headquarters of the Kombo Abedimo sub division. Then, on June 13, 2008, three Cameroonian soldiers were injured in another planned attack. The assailants made their presence felt again on July 24, 2008 and killed two Cameroonian soldiers in Kombo a Janea. Four other Cameroonian soldiers were seriously wounded; ten of the assailants were killed in return, and eight of them taken prisoner by Cameroonian

soldiers (Mbachu, 2008; Atim, 2011: 55). In the same year as Cameroonians were targets of elimination, the Nigerian Chief of Defence Staff, OwoyeAzazi, said that the Nigerian military had not been consulted during the negotiations leading to the transfer of Bakassi to Cameroon. He regretted the fact that Nigeria had lost a strategic military navigation channel yielding to the Gulf of Guinea. He simply re-echoed statements made some years before by a top military personnel. Accusations against armed groups of fomenting these attacks may be taken with a pinch of salt, considering the utterances of Azazi. Cameroonians might have thought rightly and/or wrongly that the armed insurrections were state sponsored to create confusion and take back the part of Bakassi already handed to Cameroon. While Owoye Azazi made statements of regret, Cameroon's Defence Minister Remy ZeMeka was quoted to have said in June that the violent attacks were caused by armed gangs in the Bakassi peninsula involved in drug trafficking, piracy and kidnappings in the Gulf of Guinea (Mbachu, 2012).

In spite of the spate of attacks on August 14, 2008, the Nigerian Army Amphibious Forces Suncraft landing craft left Cameroon's Bakassi peninsula. Nigeria completed the withdrawal of its military, police, and administration from the peninsula, as stated in the Greentree Agreement. In recognition of this, the Nigerian flag was lowered and the Cameroon flag hoisted in the entire peninsula (Baye, 9; Atim, 2011: 55; Daily Punch, 2013). Cameroon had thus taken control of a region it had fought for, and for which lost many of its citizens and soldiers, much like Nigeria. The issue at this point was to give Nigerians living in the region time to make up their mind if in the future they would return to Nigeria or remain there as foreigners and respect the laws of Cameroon. This also came to pass and today foreigners in the territory observe the laws of Cameroon.

The complete handing over of Bakassi took place on August 14, 2008, but the military of both countries were still buried there defending the interests of their citizens and countries. Even when Cameroon took over Bakassi, the people of the Bakassi peninsula kept complaining about the harassment of Cameroonian gendarmes. According to the Punch Newspaper of March 23, 2009, Nigerians kept fleeing from Bakassi because of these gendarmes' harassments. At Ekprilkang, in the Cross River State, the number of refugees swelled to 1,500 in a camp that was initially meant for only 400 people. On October 16, 2009, Cameroonian gendarmes killed six Nigerian fishermen in Bakassi territorial waters. On March 7, 2013, Cameroonian security authorities attacked EfutObotIkot, a settlement located in the Bakassi peninsula, part of Cameroonian sovereign territory and home to thousands of Bakassi displaced people. The attack resulted in the death of 5 people and 1,800 displacements. There were also reports that those who stayed back in Bakassi after Cameroon took over ownership were continuously persecuted by Cameroonian security forces (The Intractability of Territorial Dispute, 2013). This raised concerns as to whether the Cameroon government was committed to treating Nigerians going about their business fairly in the Bakassi peninsula.

These reports and activities of the Cameroonian military led Nigerians and the military to retaliate. In February 2011, for instance, the District Officer of Kumbo Abedimo Mr Ayuk Edward Takor and 12 other Cameroonians were taken hostage and were only liberated after a huge ransom was paid by the government of Cameroon (Atim, 2011: 55) to those who had abducted them. Nigerian soldiers who had pulled out completely from the Bakassi peninsula witnessed the return of some of them. Officers of the 82nd Division of the Nigerian Army held meetings at Ilang with top government officials under tight security. Although nothing filtered from this meeting, speculations were rife that this meeting was not unconnected with the threats by the Bakassi Self Determination Front (BSDF) to attack Cameroon in the peninsula, and with the buildup of arms by Cameroon in the peninsula (Cameroon/Nigeria Frontier, 2013). The Nigerian government, on its part, is concluding arrangements to set up two forward operational bases in the Bakassi Local Government Area of the Cross River State. Their aim is to check cases of alleged incessant killings, maiming and destruction of properties of Nigerians by Cameroonian gendarmes based in the area. The two operational bases according to Brigadier General Okwudili Azinta, Commander of the 13th Brigade of the Nigeria Army, would be set up at Dayspring 1 and Ilang. The Navy would have their base at Dayspring 1 and the Army would set up theirs at Ilang. These considerations are based on the way Nigerian citizens have been handled by Cameroonian military personnel sent to the Bakassi peninsula. On March 7, 2013, for instance, 5 indigenes of Bakassi, who resisted being forcibly evicted from Efut Obot Ikot were allegedly killed by Cameroonian military authorities, while 1800 of the displaced persons are being camped at Akwa Ikot Edem primary school in the Akpabuyo Local Government Area (Daily Punch, 2013).

Concluding Remarks

This paper has attempted to examine the role of the Nigerian and Cameroonian military in the Bakassi crisis between 1981, when the first clash took place, and 2013, when there were still misgivings as to the treatment of Nigerian citizens living in this peninsula. The paper has shown that intra and inter-state conflicts have seen the military play a role in either exacerbating them or bringing them to an end, since they are those at the war front, and they determine to a certain degree the course of events or decisions taken by leaders of the countries involved in the conflicts or crises. Such a role should therefore not be undermined as has often been the case after the cessation of conflicts. The military defend the territorial integrity of their country and assist their citizens or citizens of other countries who are victims of the war beyond creating safe corridors for food and other supplies to those in need of them.

With regards to the Bakassi conflict between Nigeria and Cameroon, the military of both countries paid a high price. Many of them were killed and others wounded in the process. They also defended the interest of their citizens in the Bakassi peninsula by coming to their aid. In spite of the years of incessant clashes between the Nigerian and

Cameroonian military, which led to deaths and loss of property, there was collaboration in the midst of intermittent skirmishes to support the ICJ ruling and respect the timetable of the Greentree Accord signed between Presidents Olusegun Obasanjo and Paul Biya of Nigeria and Cameroon on November 15, 2002. Had the military not exercised restraint and patience, the peace process would have been torpedoed by other non-state armed groups that sprang up in the Bakassi peninsula, who had support from other ethnic militias in Nigeria. The resolution of the Bakassi peninsula conflict is thanks greatly to the military of both countries that fought, as they agreed to the ICJ ruling that Bakassi was Cameroonian territory. One challenge for both military is how to work together to prevent armed groups from using Bakassi as a hideout for their militant activities, because this will only undermine the authority of both states. The Cameroonian military should also be vigilant and above all build a culture of peace with Nigerian citizens who have opted to remain in this area, where they were born.

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