

# Human Rights and the Rehabilitation of Prisoners of War in the Cameroon Anglophone Armed Conflict: Progress, Pitfalls, and Prospects

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## Abstract

The rehabilitation of prisoners of war remains a critical component of human rights protection in armed conflict, yet it is frequently overlooked in both legal analysis and post-conflict policy design, particularly in non-international armed conflicts. In the context of the Anglophone Cameroon crisis, the capture, detention, release, and reintegration of conflict-related detainees have generated complex legal and humanitarian questions. This article examines the rehabilitation of prisoners of war in the Anglophone Cameroon armed conflict through the combined lenses of international humanitarian law and international human rights law. Adopting a doctrinal and qualitative analytical approach, the study evaluates the applicable legal frameworks and appraises existing rehabilitation measures by assessing progress achieved, identifying persistent pitfalls, and exploring future prospects. The analysis demonstrates that while notable progress has been made through State-led amnesty initiatives, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes, and humanitarian interventions, significant challenges persist. These include legal ambiguity surrounding prisoner classification, fragmented institutional implementation, insufficient psychosocial and socio-economic support, and enduring social stigma. The article argues that without a comprehensive, rights-based and institutionalized rehabilitation framework, current efforts risk falling short of restoring human dignity and contributing to sustainable peace. It concludes by proposing legal, institutional, and policy reforms aimed at strengthening rehabilitation practices in conformity with international human rights standards and the long-term resolution of the Anglophone Cameroon crisis.

**Keywords:** Anglophone Cameroon crisis, armed conflict, human rights, prisoner of war, rehabilitation

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## 1. Introduction

Armed conflicts pose profound challenges to the protection of human dignity, particularly with respect to individuals captured or detained by parties to the conflict. Among the most vulnerable are prisoners of war (POWs) and conflict-related detainees, whose treatment

constitutes a central benchmark for compliance with international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law (IHRL). The Third Geneva Convention establishes detailed standards for the humane treatment, protection, and eventual release of POWs, reflecting the principle that deprivation of liberty in armed

conflict does not extinguish fundamental human rights.<sup>1</sup> In contemporary armed conflicts especially non-international armed conflicts the application of POW-related protections has become increasingly contested, as states frequently resist formal recognition of combatant status, thereby limiting the scope of protection afforded to detainees.<sup>2</sup>

The armed conflict in Cameroon's Northwest and Southwest regions, widely referred to as the Anglophone Cameroon crisis, provides a compelling context for examining these legal and humanitarian tensions. The roots of the crisis lie in Cameroon's colonial history and post-independence governance structure, characterized by the marginalization of Anglophone communities within a predominantly Francophone state.<sup>3</sup> Long-standing grievances relating to political representation, the erosion of the common law system, and the perceived assimilation of Anglo-Saxon educational and administrative traditions culminated in peaceful protests by lawyers and teachers in 2016.<sup>4</sup> The state's securitized response to these protests precipitated a rapid escalation into a protracted armed conflict between government forces and armed separatist groups, accompanied by widespread arrests, detentions, and prosecutions of individuals alleged to be fighters or supporters.<sup>5</sup>

Within this conflict environment, the status, treatment, and rehabilitation of prisoners of war and conflict-related detainees remain deeply problematic. Although the Cameroonian government has consistently framed the situation as an internal security or counter-terrorism operation, the intensity and organization of hostilities meet the threshold of a non-

international armed conflict under international law,<sup>6</sup> thereby triggering the application of Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions and relevant customary IHL norms.<sup>7</sup> Reports by international and regional human rights bodies document persistent allegations of torture, prolonged pre-trial detention, overcrowded prison conditions, and the trial of civilians before military tribunals, all of which raise serious concerns regarding compliance with both IHL and IHRL standards.<sup>8</sup>

The rehabilitation of prisoners of war constitutes a critical yet insufficiently examined dimension of protection in armed conflict. Rehabilitation extends beyond humane detention to include physical and psychological recovery, access to justice, restoration of dignity, and social reintegration.<sup>9</sup> From a legal perspective, these obligations are grounded in IHL provisions on humane treatment and repatriation, as well as IHRL norms prohibiting torture, guaranteeing the right to health, and ensuring the right to an effective remedy for victims of violations.<sup>10</sup> From a peace-building standpoint, effective rehabilitation reduces the risk of recidivism, radicalization, and renewed violence,<sup>11</sup> while fostering reconciliation and long-term stability in post-conflict societies.<sup>12</sup>

Despite its significance, rehabilitation has received limited systematic attention in analyses of the Anglophone conflict, which has largely prioritized ceasefires, accountability, and political dialogue. Where rehabilitation initiatives exist, they tend to be fragmented, ad hoc, or embedded within security-driven frameworks, raising concerns about their sustainability and compliance with human rights standards.<sup>13</sup> This gap underscores the need for a

<sup>1</sup> Geneva Convention (III) Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, August 12, 1949, 75 U.N.T.S. 135.

<sup>2</sup> Henckaerts, J.-M., & Doswald-Beck, L. (2005). *Customary international humanitarian law* (Vol. 1). Cambridge University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Konings, P., & Nyamnjoh, F. B. (1997). The Anglophone problem in Cameroon. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 35(2), 207-229.

<sup>4</sup> International Crisis Group. (2019). *Cameroon's Anglophone crisis at the crossroads* (Africa Report No. 272).

<sup>5</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2024). *World report 2024: Cameroon*. Human Rights Watch.

<sup>6</sup> Amnesty International. (2018). *Cameroon: "These killings can be stopped" – Abuses by government forces and armed separatists in Anglophone regions*. Amnesty International.

<sup>7</sup> Prosecutor v. Tadić, Case No. IT-94-1-AR72, Decision on the Defence Motion for Interlocutory Appeal on Jurisdiction (ICTY Appeals Chamber, Oct. 2, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. (2003). *Principles and guidelines on the right to a fair trial and legal assistance in Africa*. ACHPR.

<sup>9</sup> Sarkin, J. (2014). The role of rehabilitation in post-conflict justice. *Human Rights Quarterly*, 36(4).

<sup>10</sup> United Nations General Assembly. (2005). *Basic principles and guidelines on the right to a remedy and reparation* (A/RES/60/147).

<sup>11</sup> Teitel, R. (2000). *Transitional justice*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>12</sup> United Nations Development Program. (2006). *Integrated disarmament, demobilization and reintegration standards*. UNDP.

<sup>13</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2019). *Human rights violations and abuses in the context of the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon*. OHCHR.

balanced and context-sensitive inquiry that recognizes both normative commitments and empirical realities.

Accordingly, this article examines human rights and the rehabilitation of prisoners of war in the Cameroon Anglophone armed conflict, focusing on progress, pitfalls, and prospects. Anchored in the frameworks of international humanitarian and human rights law, the study evaluates state practice, institutional responses, and existing rehabilitation measures, while identifying pathways through which rights-based rehabilitation can contribute to sustainable peace and national reconciliation.

## 2. Conceptual and Terminological Clarification

In legal and human rights scholarship, conceptual precision is indispensable, particularly where terms derive simultaneously from treaty law, domestic statutes, judicial interpretation, and scholarly discourse. This study employs key concepts drawn directly from its title—*human rights, prisoners of war, rehabilitation, armed conflict, progress, pitfalls, and prospects*. Each term is clarified through statutory definitions, leading scholarly interpretations, and Black’s Law Dictionary, ensuring doctrinal accuracy and analytical coherence.

### 2.1 Human Rights

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) recognizes human rights as inherent entitlements belonging to “all members of the human family” and grounded in dignity, freedom, and equality.<sup>1</sup> These rights are further codified in binding instruments such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR), which impose legal obligations on states to respect, protect, and fulfill fundamental rights even in times of emergency, subject to lawful derogation.<sup>2</sup>

Donnelly (2013)<sup>3</sup> defines human rights as rights one possesses “simply because one is human,”

emphasizing universality and inalienability. Alston and Goodman (2013)<sup>4</sup> conceptualize human rights as legally enforceable claims that restrain state power and protect human dignity.

Human rights are defined as “the freedoms, immunities, and benefits that all human beings should be able to claim as a matter of right.”<sup>5</sup> In armed conflict, these definitions affirm that detention including of prisoners of war does not extinguish core human rights protections.

### 2.2 Prisoners of War

Article 4 of the Third Geneva Convention defines prisoners of war as members of the armed forces or organized resistance movements who and are entitled to humane treatment and legal protection.<sup>6</sup> In non-international armed conflicts, Common Article 3 provides minimum protections to persons detained in connection with hostilities.

Pictet (1960)<sup>7</sup> defines POWs as combatants captured by the enemy who must be protected against violence, intimidation, and degrading treatment.

Dinstein (2016)<sup>8</sup> describes POWs as lawful participants in hostilities who, upon capture, benefit from immunity for lawful acts of war and extensive protective guarantees.

A prisoner of war is “a person captured and held by an enemy during an armed conflict, especially a member of the armed forces, entitled to treatment under the laws of war.”<sup>9</sup> For this study, the term is used in a functional and protective sense to encompass detained fighters in the Anglophone conflict, irrespective of formal recognition by the state.

### 2.3 Rehabilitation

The UN Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation define rehabilitation as including “medical and psychological care as well as legal and social services” for victims of serious human rights and

<sup>1</sup> United Nations. (1948). Universal Declaration of Human Rights. UN General Assembly Res. 217 A (III).

<sup>2</sup> International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Dec. 16, 1966, 999 U.N.T.S. 171.

<sup>3</sup> Donnelly, J. (2013). *Universal human rights in theory and practice* (3rd ed.). Cornell University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Alston, P., & Goodman, R. (2013). *International human rights* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Garner, B. A. (Ed.). (2019). *Black’s law dictionary* (11th ed.). Thomson Reuters.

<sup>6</sup> Geneva Convention (III) Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, Aug. 12, 1949, 75 U.N.T.S. 135.

<sup>7</sup> Pictet, J. (1960). Commentary on the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949: Volume III—Geneva Convention relative to the treatment of prisoners of war. ICRC.

<sup>8</sup> Dinstein, Y. (2016). *The conduct of hostilities under the law of international armed conflict* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

humanitarian law violations.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, Article 14 of the Convention against Torture obliges states to ensure redress, including rehabilitation, for victims of torture. Sarkin (2014)<sup>2</sup> defines rehabilitation as measures aimed at restoring victims' physical, psychological, legal, and social integrity. Teitel (2000)<sup>3</sup> views rehabilitation as a transitional justice mechanism designed to repair harm and facilitate reintegration.

Rehabilitation is defined as “the process of restoring an individual to a useful and constructive place in society through treatment, education, or training”.<sup>4</sup> Applied to prisoners of war, rehabilitation encompasses post- detention recovery, reintegration, and guarantees of non-repetition.

#### 2.4 Armed Conflict (Non-International Armed Conflict)

While the Geneva Conventions do not explicitly define armed conflict, Common Article 3 applies to “armed conflict not of an international character” occurring within a state. Additional Protocol II further regulates such conflicts involving organized armed groups exercising control over territory.<sup>5</sup>

Cassese (2005)<sup>6</sup> defines a non-international armed conflict as sustained armed violence between state forces and organized armed groups. Dinstein (2016)<sup>7</sup> emphasizes intensity and organization as determinative criteria.

Armed conflict is defined as “hostilities involving armed forces that are governed by the laws of war, whether international or internal”.<sup>8</sup> The Anglophone Cameroon crisis satisfies these legal thresholds, activating IHL obligations toward detainees.

#### 2.5 Progress

While not explicitly defined in treaties, progress is implicit in international monitoring mechanisms such as state reporting under the ICCPR and ACHPR, where improvements in compliance and implementation are assessed over time. Sen (1999)<sup>9</sup> conceptualizes progress as the expansion of substantive freedoms and institutional capacity. Alston (2014)<sup>10</sup> defines progress as the translation of legal norms into tangible improvements in human rights enjoyment. Progress means “forward movement toward a more developed or improved condition”.<sup>11</sup> In this study, progress refers to positive developments in law, policy, or practice concerning POW rehabilitation in Cameroon.

#### 2.6 Pitfalls

Although not statutorily defined, pitfalls are recognized in implementation literature as obstacles undermining compliance with legal obligations, particularly in human rights treaty implementation processes. Pressman and Wildavsky (1984)<sup>12</sup> define pitfalls as failures arising from policy implementation gaps. Merry (2006)<sup>13</sup> views pitfalls as disjunctions between human rights norms and lived realities.

A pitfall is “a hidden or unsuspected difficulty or danger”.<sup>14</sup> Pitfalls in this context include structural weaknesses that undermine rehabilitation efforts.

#### 2.7 Prospects

Prospects emerge in forward-looking instruments such as peace agreements, DDR frameworks, and transitional justice policies, including the African Union Transitional Justice Policy (2019).

Goldstein (2001)<sup>15</sup> defines prospects as future

<sup>1</sup> United Nations General Assembly. (2005). Basic principles and guidelines on the right to a remedy and reparation for victims of gross violations of international human rights law and serious violations of international humanitarian law (A/RES/60/147).

<sup>2</sup> Sarkin, J. (2014). The role of rehabilitation in post-conflict justice. *Human Rights Quarterly*, 36(4), 784–812. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hrq.2014.0051>

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Garner, B. A. (Ed.). (2019). *Black's law dictionary* (11th ed.). Thomson Reuters.

<sup>5</sup> Geneva Convention (III) Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, Aug. 12, 1949, 75 U.N.T.S. 135.

<sup>6</sup> Cassese, A. (2005). *International law* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

<sup>7</sup> Dinstein, Y. (2016). *The conduct of hostilities under the law of international armed conflict* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>10</sup> Alston, P., & Goodman, R. (2013). *International human rights* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Pressman, J. L., & Wildavsky, A. (1984). *Implementation: How great expectations in Washington are dashed in Oakland* (3rd ed.). University of California Press.

<sup>13</sup> Merry, S. E. (2006). *Human rights and gender violence: Translating international law into local justice*. University of Chicago Press.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

opportunities shaped by institutional and political variables. Teitel (2000)<sup>1</sup> associates prospects with reform pathways in post-conflict societies. Prospect is defined as “a reasonable expectation or likelihood of a future development”.<sup>2</sup> Prospects here denote the potential for improving POW rehabilitation through reform and peace-building.

By integrating statutory provisions, authoritative scholarship, and Black’s Law Dictionary definitions, this section establishes a robust conceptual foundation for analyzing human rights and the rehabilitation of prisoners of war in the Cameroon Anglophone armed conflict. This triangulated approach enhances doctrinal rigor and ensures terminological consistency throughout the article.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework provides the analytical lens through which legal norms, institutional practices, and lived realities are examined. In analyzing human rights and the rehabilitation of prisoners of war in the Cameroon Anglophone armed conflict, this article adopts a pluralist theoretical framework drawing from Human Rights Theory, International Humanitarian Law (IHL) Compliance Theory, Rehabilitation Theory, and Transitional Justice Theory. This integrated framework enables a comprehensive understanding of detention, treatment, and post-captivity rehabilitation within the context of a non-international armed conflict.

#### 3.1 Human Rights Theory

Human Rights Theory constitutes the normative foundation of this study. The theory is grounded in the principle that human rights are universal, inalienable, and inherent to all individuals by virtue of their humanity, irrespective of legal status or conduct (Donnelly, 2013). Even during armed conflict, states remain bound by minimum human rights obligations, particularly those relating to dignity, humane treatment, and freedom from torture.<sup>3</sup>

Dworkin’s conception of rights as “trumps”

against collective or utilitarian goals underscores the argument that national security considerations cannot justify systematic violations of fundamental rights.<sup>4</sup> Complementarily, Sen’s capability approach reframes human rights as the substantive freedoms necessary for individuals to live lives of dignity, including access to physical and psychological rehabilitation.<sup>5</sup> Within this framework, the denial of rehabilitation to prisoners of war constitutes a direct affront to human dignity and human development.

Applied to the Anglophone Cameroon conflict, Human Rights Theory challenges state narratives that classify captured fighters as terrorists or criminals devoid of protection. Instead, it affirms that all detainees remain rights-holders entitled to humane treatment and rehabilitation consistent with international human rights law.<sup>6</sup>

#### 3.2 International Humanitarian Law Compliance Theory

International Humanitarian Law Compliance Theory explains the conditions under which parties to armed conflict comply with, selectively apply, or violate humanitarian norms. Scholars argue that compliance is influenced by a range of factors, including political will, institutional capacity, reciprocity, command responsibility, and external monitoring.<sup>7</sup> Henckaerts and Doswald-Beck (2005)<sup>8</sup> demonstrate that customary international humanitarian law binds both state and non-state actors in non-international armed conflicts, particularly through Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions, which mandates humane treatment and prohibits torture and cruel treatment. Jurisprudence from the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia confirms that the existence of a non-international armed conflict triggers these obligations regardless of

<sup>1</sup> Teitel, R. (2000). *Transitional justice*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Nowak, M. (2005). *U.N. covenant on civil and political rights: CCPR commentary* (2nd ed.). N.P. Engel.

<sup>4</sup> Dworkin, R. (1977). *Taking rights seriously*. Harvard University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2019). Report of the OHCHR mission to the Republic of Cameroon. United Nations.

<sup>7</sup> Roberts, A. (2001). The laws of war in the war on terror. *International & Comparative Law Quarterly*, 32(2), 266–275.

<sup>8</sup> Henckaerts, J.-M., & Doswald-Beck, L. (2005). *Customary international humanitarian law* (Vol. 1). Cambridge University Press.

formal recognition of prisoner-of-war status.<sup>1</sup>

Within the Cameroonian context, IHL Compliance Theory enables a critical examination of the state's reluctance to recognize POW protections and the implications of such denial for detention conditions and rehabilitation practices. It also sheds light on how securitization and legal ambiguity undermine compliance with international norms governing the treatment and recovery of conflict-related detainees.

### 3.3 Rehabilitation Theory

Rehabilitation Theory provides the core conceptual lens for analyzing post-detention obligations toward prisoners of war. Traditionally rooted in criminal justice and penology, rehabilitation theory emphasizes restoring individuals to meaningful participation in society through medical care, psychological support, education, and social reintegration.<sup>2</sup>

In the international human rights context, rehabilitation has evolved into a recognized form of reparation for serious violations. The United Nations Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation identify rehabilitation as encompassing medical, psychological, legal, and social services for victims of gross human rights violations.<sup>3</sup> Sarkin (2014)<sup>4</sup> further argues that rehabilitation is indispensable in post-conflict societies, as untreated trauma and social exclusion perpetuate instability and cycles of violence.

Applied to the Anglophone Cameroon armed conflict, rehabilitation theory reframes the treatment of prisoners of war from a security-centered paradigm to a rights-based and restorative one. It underscores the argument that the failure to rehabilitate detainees not only violates international obligations but also undermines prospects for sustainable peace.

### 3.4 Transitional Justice Theory

Transitional Justice Theory situates rehabilitation within broader societal efforts to address past abuses and facilitate post-conflict transformation. Teitel (2000)<sup>5</sup> defines transitional justice as the set

of judicial and non-judicial mechanisms employed by societies emerging from conflict to confront legacies of mass violations. These mechanisms include accountability, truth-seeking, reparations, and institutional reform.

De Greiff (2006)<sup>6</sup> emphasizes that rehabilitation plays both corrective and transformative roles by restoring victims' dignity and enabling social reintegration. At the regional level, the African Union Transitional Justice Policy recognizes rehabilitation as a core component of reparative justice in African conflict and post-conflict settings.<sup>7</sup>

In the context of Anglophone Cameroon, Transitional Justice Theory allows prisoners-of-war rehabilitation to be conceptualized as a peace-building tool rather than a peripheral humanitarian concern. It highlights the potential of integrating rehabilitation into future dialogue processes, reintegration programs, and institutional reforms aimed at addressing the root causes of the conflict.

Taken together, these theories provide a robust analytical architecture for this study. Human Rights Theory establishes the normative imperative of dignity and entitlement; IHL Compliance Theory explains patterns of adherence and violation; Rehabilitation Theory foregrounds recovery and reintegration; and Transitional Justice Theory situates rehabilitation within broader peace-building and reconciliation efforts. This integrated framework enables a nuanced assessment of the progress, pitfalls, and prospects of rehabilitating prisoners of war in the Cameroon Anglophone armed conflict.

## 4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative doctrinal and socio-legal approach to examine human rights and the rehabilitation of prisoners of war in the Cameroon Anglophone armed conflict. The doctrinal method enables a detailed analysis of international, regional, and domestic legal instruments governing the treatment and rehabilitation of prisoners of war, including

<sup>1</sup> *Prosecutor v. Tadić*, Case No. IT-94-1-AR72, Decision on the Defence Motion for Interlocutory Appeal on Jurisdiction (ICTY Appeals Chamber, October 2, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> McNeill, F. (2012). Four forms of "offender" rehabilitation: Towards an interdisciplinary perspective. *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, 17(1), 18–36. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8333.2011.02039.x>

<sup>3</sup> United Nations General Assembly. (2005). Basic principles and guidelines on the right to a remedy and reparation (A/RES/60/147).

<sup>4</sup> Sarkin, J. (2014). The role of rehabilitation in post-conflict justice. *Human Rights Quarterly*, 36(4), 784–812.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> De Greiff, P. (2006). *The handbook of reparations*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>7</sup> African Union Commission. (2019). African Union transitional justice policy. African Union.

treaties, customary international law, national legislation, and judicial decisions.<sup>1</sup> Complementing this, the socio-legal perspective situates these norms within the political, institutional, and operational context of Cameroon, highlighting gaps between formal legal obligations and actual practice.<sup>2</sup>

The research relies on documentary sources comprising both primary and secondary materials. Primary sources include the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols, customary international humanitarian law, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, and relevant domestic legislation and constitutional provisions governing detention, military justice, and counter-terrorism measures.<sup>3</sup> Secondary sources include scholarly books, peer-reviewed articles, policy reports, institutional commentaries, and documentation produced by international and regional organizations, such as the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross.<sup>4</sup> These sources were selected on the basis of authority, relevance, and reliability to provide both legal and contextual insights into the rehabilitation of prisoners of war.<sup>5</sup>

At the domestic level, the study analyses Cameroonian legislation and regulations, including the Constitution, military justice laws, counter-terrorism provisions, and penitentiary policies, to evaluate the extent of domestic incorporation and implementation of international and regional norms. This doctrinal analysis is complemented by institutional reports, which provide empirical insights into detention conditions, treatment of detainees, and rehabilitation-related practices in the Northwest and Southwest regions. Scholarly works on international humanitarian law, human rights, rehabilitation, and transitional justice further inform and provide theoretical grounding.

The study is based entirely on documentary research and does not involve direct interaction

with human subjects. Ethical considerations are observed through careful and accurate citation of sources, responsible use of sensitive information regarding detainees, and avoidance of attributing individual criminal responsibility, which remains the domain of competent judicial bodies.<sup>6</sup>

## 5. Legal and Human Rights Framework Governing Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation of prisoners of war and conflict-related detainees is not only a humanitarian imperative but also a legal obligation under international, regional, and domestic law. The legal and human rights frameworks establish clear standards for humane treatment, access to medical and psychological care, and social reintegration. In the context of the Cameroon Anglophone conflict, these frameworks provide both normative guidance and evaluative benchmarks for assessing the extent to which rehabilitation programs are implemented effectively. They also highlight the state's dual responsibility to respect international norms and to operationalize domestic mechanisms that uphold detainees' dignity and rights.

### 5.1 International Humanitarian Law Framework

The rehabilitation of prisoners of war and conflict-related detainees is primarily grounded in international humanitarian law (IHL). The Third Geneva Convention of 1949 provides the principal legal regime for POW treatment. Article 13 mandates humane treatment, protection from violence or intimidation, and respect for the dignity of prisoners.<sup>7</sup> Article 20 requires that detainees be afforded adequate medical attention, while Articles 68–71 provide for the release, repatriation, and reintegration of prisoners at the cessation of hostilities, emphasizing the legal obligation to facilitate their return to society.<sup>8</sup> Additional Protocol I (1977), Article 75, reinforces the obligation to treat all persons not actively participating in hostilities

<sup>1</sup> McConville, M., & Chui, W. H. (Eds.). (2017). *Research methods for law* (2nd ed.). Edinburgh University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Banakar, R., & Travers, M. (Eds.). (2013). *Law and social theory* (2nd ed.). Hart Publishing.

<sup>3</sup> Geneva Convention (III) Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, August 12, 1949; Henckaerts, J.-M., & Doswald-Beck, L. (2005). *Customary international humanitarian law* (Vol. 1). Cambridge University Press.

<sup>4</sup> African Union Commission. (2019). African Union transitional justice policy. African Union; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2019).

<sup>5</sup> Report of the OHCHR mission to the Republic of Cameroon; International Committee of the Red Cross. (2020). Commentary on the Third Geneva Convention.

<sup>6</sup> Roberts, A., & Guelff, R. (Eds.). (2000). *Documents on the laws of war* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.

<sup>7</sup> Article 13 of the Third Geneva Conventions 1949.

<sup>8</sup> Article 20, 68, and 71 of the Third Geneva Conventions 1949.

humanely, including access to necessary medical care and protection of their physical and mental well-being.<sup>1</sup> Customary IHL complements these treaty obligations, establishing that even in non-international armed conflicts, rehabilitative measures, medical treatment, and psychological care must be provided.<sup>2</sup>

### 5.2 International Human Rights Law

International human rights law complements IHL by establishing non-derogable duties to protect detainees' physical, mental, and social well-being. The ICCPR, Article 10(1),<sup>3</sup> requires that all persons deprived of liberty be treated with humanity and respect for their inherent dignity.<sup>4</sup> The Convention Against Torture (CAT), Article 14,<sup>5</sup> obliges states to ensure that victims of torture receive rehabilitation and social reintegration.<sup>6</sup> The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Mandela Rules) provide detailed operational guidance on implementing rehabilitation programs. Rules 24, 27, and 29 guarantee adequate medical care, including mental health services, while Rules 104–106 mandate vocational and educational programs to facilitate successful reintegration into society.<sup>7</sup> Collectively, these instruments establish that rehabilitation is not discretionary but a human rights obligation.

### 5.3 Regional Legal Framework

At the regional level, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) enshrines the right of detainees to humane treatment and obliges states to facilitate rehabilitation and social reintegration.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, Article 5 prohibits torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, while Article 19 guarantees prisoners access to education and rehabilitation opportunities.<sup>9</sup> The African Union Transitional Justice Policy highlights rehabilitation as a core mechanism in post-conflict recovery, recommending psychosocial support, medical

care, vocational training, and reintegration programs for persons affected by armed conflict.<sup>10</sup> These regional instruments reinforce international obligations and provide contextual guidance for Cameroon.

### 5.4 Domestic Legal Framework

At the domestic level, the rehabilitation of prisoners of war and conflict-related detainees is regulated through constitutional guarantees, military justice regimes, prison legislation, and post-conflict legal frameworks. Across Africa, domestic legal systems are expected to give effect to international humanitarian law and international human rights law through incorporation, domestication, or constitutional supremacy clauses.<sup>11</sup>

The effectiveness of rehabilitation measures therefore depends largely on how African states internalize these international obligations and translate them into enforceable domestic norms and institutional practices.<sup>12</sup>

#### (i) Domestic Legal Framework Applicable to African States Generally

Across African states, domestic legal frameworks addressing detention and rehabilitation are primarily anchored in constitutional protections of human dignity and the prohibition of torture and ill-treatment. Many African Constitutions guarantee the right to dignity, humane treatment, and access to health care for persons deprived of liberty, thereby laying a foundational basis for rehabilitation.<sup>13</sup> These constitutional guarantees are often reinforced by national prison laws, which identify rehabilitation, reformation, and social reintegration as core objectives of imprisonment.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, military justice laws and armed forces acts across African states regulate the treatment of persons detained in the context of armed conflict. Although domestic legal systems rarely employ the technical term "prisoners of

<sup>1</sup> Article 5 of Additional Protocol I 1977.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> United Nations. (1966). International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 10(1).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Article 14 of the Convention Against Torture 1987.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> United Nations. (2015). Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Mandela Rules), Rules 24, 27, 29, 104–106.

<sup>8</sup> African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, June 27, 1981, Articles 5 and 19.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> African Union Commission. (2019). African Union transitional justice policy. African Union.

<sup>11</sup> Viljoen, F. (2012). *International human rights law in Africa* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

<sup>12</sup> Okafor, O. C. (2007). *The African human rights system, activism, and international institutions*. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>13</sup> Murray, R. (2019). *The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights: A commentary* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

<sup>14</sup> Sarkin, J. (2008). *Prisons in Africa: An evaluation from a human rights perspective*. HSRC Press.

war,” safeguards applicable to conflict-related detainees such as access to medical care, judicial oversight, and protection against inhumane treatment are commonly provided.<sup>1</sup> These domestic standards reflect the influence of international and regional norms, particularly the Nelson Mandela Rules and the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights, which emphasize rehabilitation-oriented detention systems.<sup>2</sup>

Despite these normative frameworks, implementation across many African states remains constrained by structural challenges, including resource limitations, overcrowded detention facilities, prolonged armed conflicts, and the securitization of detention through emergency and counter-terrorism laws.<sup>3</sup> These factors often undermine access to meaningful rehabilitation services for conflict-related detainees.

#### (ii) Domestic Legal Framework in Cameroon

In Cameroon, the domestic legal framework governing the rehabilitation of prisoners of war and conflict-related detainees is derived from constitutional, military, and penitentiary legislation, supplemented by Cameroon’s international obligations. The Constitution of the Republic of Cameroon (1996) guarantees respect for human dignity and prohibits torture, cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. These guarantees apply to all persons deprived of liberty and form the constitutional basis for rehabilitation, including access to medical and psychological care.<sup>4</sup>

The Military Justice Code of Cameroon (Law No. 2016/007) regulates detention within the military justice system and provides safeguards such as access to medical care, judicial supervision, and protection from inhumane treatment.<sup>5</sup> Although the Code does not expressly regulate the rehabilitation of prisoners of war, its provisions implicitly support rehabilitative objectives for conflict-related detainees, particularly within the context of the Anglophone armed conflict.

Cameroon’s penitentiary legislation and prison regulations further emphasize rehabilitation as a core objective of imprisonment. These laws provide for vocational training, educational programs, medical services, and social reintegration initiatives applicable to all detainees, including those detained in connection with armed conflict.<sup>6</sup> In principle, this framework aligns Cameroon’s domestic law with international and regional standards that recognize rehabilitation as an essential component of lawful detention.

However, reports by international human rights bodies indicate persistent gaps between legal norms and actual practice. Challenges such as prolonged pre-trial detention, inadequate medical and psychological services, overcrowding, and the prioritization of security concerns continue to impede effective rehabilitation in the context of the Anglophone conflict.<sup>7</sup>

#### (iii) Assessment

Overall, domestic legal frameworks across African states and particularly in Cameroon provide a formal legal foundation for the rehabilitation of prisoners of war and conflict-related detainees. Constitutional guarantees, military justice regimes, and prison regulations collectively reflect an acceptance of rehabilitation as a legitimate objective of detention.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the absence of explicit POW-specific rehabilitation provisions and persistent implementation challenges continue to limit the effectiveness of these domestic frameworks in armed conflict settings.

The interplay of international, regional, and domestic law establishes a comprehensive legal framework governing the rehabilitation of prisoners of war. Collectively, these provisions emphasize humane treatment, access to medical and psychological care, vocational and educational training, and structured reintegration into society. They provide both legal obligations and evaluative benchmarks to

<sup>1</sup> Sivakumaran, S. (2012). *The law of non-international armed conflict*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations. (2015). *United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules)*. UN General Assembly.

<sup>3</sup> African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights. (2017). *General Comment No. 4 on the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights*. ACHPR.

<sup>4</sup> Republic of Cameroon. (1996). *Constitution of the Republic of Cameroon* (Law No. 96-06 of 18 January 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Republic of Cameroon. (2016). *Military Justice Code* (Law No. 2016/007 of 12 July).

<sup>6</sup> Republic of Cameroon. (1992). *Decree No. 92/052 of 27 March 1992 on the penitentiary system* (as amended).

<sup>7</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2019) Report of the OHCHR mission to the Republic of Cameroon. United Nations.

<sup>8</sup> African Union Commission. (2019). *African Union transitional justice policy*. African Union.

assess the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs in Cameroon's Anglophone conflict.

## 6. Contextual Overview: The Anglophone Cameroon Armed Conflict

The Anglophone Cameroon armed conflict is rooted in historical, political, and legal grievances arising from Cameroon's dual colonial heritage and post-independence state structure. Cameroon emerged from British and French colonial administrations with distinct legal, educational, and administrative systems. Following the 1961 plebiscite, the former British Southern Cameroons entered into a federal union with La République du Cameroun, premised on constitutional assurances of autonomy and the preservation of the common law and Anglo-Saxon educational traditions. The gradual erosion of federalism and the eventual adoption of a centralized unitary state in 1972 generated long-standing perceptions of political, legal, and socio-economic marginalization among Anglophone Cameroonians.<sup>1</sup>

These grievances crystallized in 2016 when Anglophone lawyers and teachers organized peaceful protests against the perceived marginalization of the English language, the imposition of the civil law system in Anglophone courts, and the appointment of Francophone officials unfamiliar with common law traditions. The state's response characterized by arrests, the use of force, and prolonged internet shutdowns escalated the situation from civil protest into a broader political crisis.<sup>2</sup> By late 2017, armed confrontations had emerged between Cameroonian security forces and various non-state armed groups advocating for the secession of an independent state known as "Ambazonia," thereby elevating the situation to a non-international armed conflict within the meaning of international humanitarian law.<sup>3</sup>

Since then, the conflict has been marked by widespread human rights violations and grave humanitarian consequences. Reports by

international and regional bodies document extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, prolonged detention, torture, enforced disappearances, and the destruction of civilian property by both state and non-state actors.<sup>4</sup> Thousands of individuals have been detained in connection with the conflict, including suspected fighters, government security personnel captured by armed groups, and civilians accused of supporting opposing sides. Within this context, questions concerning the legal status, treatment, and rehabilitation of prisoners of war or conflict-related detainees have become increasingly salient. Recent scholarship further underscores systemic weaknesses in the implementation and enforcement of international humanitarian law and international human rights law within the Anglophone conflict. In examining the protection of war correspondents in the conflict, Nkwiyir (2025)<sup>5</sup> highlights persistent institutional and enforcement gaps that expose protected persons to abuse and ill-treatment. Although the study focuses on journalists, its findings reveal broader structural deficiencies in the conflict environment that equally affect other vulnerable groups, including persons detained in relation to hostilities. These deficiencies have direct implications for the humane treatment and rehabilitation of prisoners of war and analogous detainees, reinforcing the argument that rehabilitation challenges in Cameroon are symptomatic of wider failures in the domestic application of international legal obligations.<sup>6</sup>

The Cameroonian government has largely framed the conflict through a counter-terrorism and internal security paradigm, relying predominantly on domestic criminal and military law to arrest, prosecute, and detain suspected separatists. This securitized approach has significant consequences for the recognition of POW-type protections and for access to rehabilitation measures envisaged under international humanitarian and human rights law.<sup>7</sup> Conversely, non-state armed groups have

<sup>1</sup> Konings, P., & Nyamnjoh, F. B. (2003). *Negotiating an Anglophone identity: A study of the politics of recognition and representation in Cameroon*. Brill.

<sup>2</sup> International Crisis Group. (2017). *Cameroon's Anglophone crisis at the crossroads* (Africa Report No. 250). ICG.

<sup>3</sup> Sivakumaran, S. (2012). *The law of non-international armed conflict*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Amnesty International. (2021). *Cameroon: Human rights violations in the Anglophone regions*. Amnesty International.

<sup>5</sup> Nkwiyir, K. A. (2025). Armed conflicts and the media: An assessment of the protection of war correspondents (journalists) in the underway Anglophone Cameroon armed conflicts. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 9(1), 1025–1052. <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.9010085>

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Murray, R. (2019). *The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights: A commentary* (2nd ed.). Oxford University.

also engaged in detention practices outside any formal legal framework, further complicating compliance with international standards governing detention and rehabilitation in non-international armed conflicts.

Against this backdrop, the Anglophone Cameroon armed conflict presents a complex legal and humanitarian setting in which international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and domestic law intersect and at times collide. The protracted nature of the hostilities, combined with mass arrests and prolonged detention, underscores the urgency of examining not only the legality of detention but also the extent to which meaningful rehabilitation medical, psychological, social, and vocational is recognized and implemented. This contextual overview therefore provides the necessary foundation for assessing the progress, pitfalls, and prospects of rehabilitating prisoners of war and conflict-related detainees within the Cameroonian context.

### 7. Progress in the Rehabilitation of Prisoners of War

In the North-West and South-West Regions of Cameroon, progress in the rehabilitation of prisoners of war and conflict-related detainees has been driven primarily by state-led institutional mechanisms, complemented by faith-based and community-oriented initiatives. Although the Anglophone armed conflict persists, these interventions demonstrate an incremental shift toward rehabilitation as a practical component of conflict management and peace-building.<sup>1</sup>

A central institutional pillar is the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) framework, established through the National Committee for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (NCDDR) by presidential decree in 2018. Through DDR centers located in and outside the conflict-affected regions, former combatants including individuals released from detention or captured in connection with hostilities are enrolled in structured programs designed to facilitate psychological recovery and

socio-economic reintegration.<sup>2</sup> These centers provide medical screening, psychosocial counseling, civic education, and vocational training in trades such as agriculture, tailoring, carpentry, and small-scale entrepreneurship, thereby addressing both the material and psychological dimensions of rehabilitation.<sup>3</sup>

Practical progress is also reflected in the scale of participation in DDR initiatives. Available reports indicate that several thousand ex-combatants have passed through DDR centers nationwide, with a significant number progressing toward final reintegration after completing skills-acquisition and civic reorientation programs.<sup>4</sup> While participation remains voluntary and uneven, the DDR program represents the most institutionalized effort by the Cameroonian state to operationalize rehabilitation beyond mere detention or punishment.<sup>5</sup>

In parallel, the penitentiary and judicial authorities, under the supervision of the Ministry of Justice, have contributed to rehabilitation through presidential clemency measures, provisional releases, and discontinuance of proceedings for certain conflict related detainees. These measures have enabled individuals to exit prolonged detention and either reintegrate directly into society or enter DDR programs, thus mitigating the long-term physical and psychological harms associated with incarceration.<sup>6</sup> Although discretionary and selective, such releases signal a gradual shift toward rehabilitative and reconciliatory approaches within the justice system.

Another significant avenue of progress lies in humanitarian access to detention facilities. The Cameroonian government has continued to engage with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), permitting detention visits, medical assistance, and facilitation of family contact in accordance with international humanitarian law applicable to non-international armed conflicts (International Committee of the Red Cross).<sup>7</sup> These activities contribute directly to rehabilitation by preserving detainees'

<sup>1</sup> International Crisis Group. (2020). *Cameroon: Managing the Anglophone crisis* (Africa Report No. 272). ICG.

<sup>2</sup> Monteh, R. N. (2021). Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR): A new paradigm in the resolution of the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon—Myth or reality. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 5(1), 390–400.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Republic of Cameroon. (1992). *Decree No. 92/052 of 27 March 1992 relating to the penitentiary system.*

<sup>7</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross. (2016). *ICRC activities in situations of non-international armed conflict.* ICRC.

physical health, psychological well-being, and human dignity during confinement.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond formal state institutions, churches and faith-based organizations have played a critical role in the rehabilitation of prisoners of war and conflict-affected persons in the Anglophone regions. Religious bodies particularly the Roman Catholic Church, the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon, the Cameroon Baptist Convention, and ecumenical faith platforms have provided counseling, trauma healing, mediation, and reintegration support to former detainees and ex-combatants.<sup>2</sup> These interventions address the moral, psychological, and social dimensions of rehabilitation that state-led mechanisms often struggle to reach.<sup>3</sup>

Church-led initiatives have also contributed significantly to community acceptance and reconciliation, which are essential for sustainable rehabilitation. Clergy and church leaders frequently serve as trusted intermediaries between former fighters, victims, and local communities, facilitating dialogue, forgiveness, and social reintegration.<sup>4</sup> In several instances, churches have provided temporary shelter, vocational guidance, and moral support to individuals released from detention, thereby complementing DDR programs and government reintegration efforts.

From a normative standpoint, these practical initiatives are reinforced by Cameroon's constitutional and statutory framework, which guarantees human dignity, prohibits torture and inhuman or degrading treatment, and emphasizes reformation and social reintegration as objectives of detention.<sup>5</sup> Although these provisions do not expressly regulate prisoners of war in non-international armed conflicts, they provide a domestic legal foundation that legitimizes both state-led and non-state rehabilitation initiatives.

Taken together, the activities of DDR institutions, judicial and executive release mechanisms, humanitarian engagement, and faith-based organizations demonstrate that progress in the

rehabilitation of prisoners of war in the Anglophone Cameroon armed conflict is multi-layered and practice-oriented, even if uneven and constrained by ongoing insecurity.<sup>6</sup>

From a broader African perspective, rehabilitation of prisoners of war and conflict-related detainees has increasingly been pursued through post-conflict and transitional justice mechanisms, particularly Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programs, truth and reconciliation processes, and community-based reintegration initiatives. In countries such as Sierra Leone and Liberia, DDR programs following civil wars combined vocational training, psychosocial support, and community reconciliation to facilitate the reintegration of former combatants and detainees.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Rwanda's post-genocide rehabilitation framework, though distinct in context, integrated re-education, community service, and reintegration mechanisms aimed at restoring social cohesion and addressing the psychological impacts of mass detention.<sup>8</sup>

In Uganda, the Amnesty Act and associated reintegration initiatives enabled former combatants of the Lord's Resistance Army to transition from detention to civilian life through conditional amnesty, counseling, and livelihood support.<sup>9</sup> These African experiences demonstrate a continental trend toward rehabilitation-oriented responses that move beyond punitive detention, emphasizing reintegration, reconciliation, and human dignity. When viewed against this backdrop, Cameroon's reliance on DDR structures, executive release mechanisms, and community and faith-based support aligns with evolving African state practice, even as it continues to face challenges of implementation, inclusivity, and sustainability.

## 8. Pitfalls and Human Rights Challenges

Despite measurable progress in institutionalizing rehabilitation for prisoners of war and conflict-related detainees in the Anglophone Cameroon armed conflict, significant pitfalls and human rights challenges persist. These challenges

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> Human Rights and Legal Research Centre. (2021). *Traditional rulers and faith-based actors as agents of reconciliation and reconstruction in the North-West and South-West Regions of Cameroon.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Republic of Cameroon. (1996). *Constitution of the Republic of Cameroon* (Law No. 96-06 of 18 January 1996).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Humphreys, M., & Weinstein, J. M. (2007). Demobilization and reintegration. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 51(4), 531–567.

<sup>8</sup> Clark, P. (2010). *The Gacaca courts, post-genocide justice and reconciliation in Rwanda: Justice without lawyers.* Cambridge University Press.

<sup>9</sup> Allen, T. (2006). *Trial justice: The International Criminal Court and the Lord's Resistance Army.* Zed Books.

undermine both the effectiveness of rehabilitation mechanisms and compliance with international human rights norms.

#### 8.1 Persistent Insecurity and Access Constraints

Ongoing violence and insecurity in the North-West and South-West regions continue to impede rehabilitation efforts. For example, periodic clashes between security forces and non-state armed groups have restricted access to DDR centres and detention facilities, limiting the ability of humanitarian actors and monitoring bodies to deliver services and assess conditions.<sup>1</sup> Insecurity in areas such as Bamenda and Kumba has forced temporary closures of rehabilitation activities, illustrating how conflict dynamics directly affect operational continuity.

#### 8.2 Resource Limitations and Service Gaps

Rehabilitation programmes, particularly Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) centers, suffer from chronic resource shortages. Although government figures indicate that thousands of ex-combatants have entered DDR programmes, centres frequently lack sufficient trainers, psychosocial counsellors, and equipment to provide comprehensive support. At the Bamenda DDR Center, trainees have reported delays or shortages in materials for vocational training such as carpentry or tailoring, undermining the goal of sustainable skills development.<sup>2</sup> These gaps reflect broader budgetary constraints that continue to impede the quality and reach of rehabilitation services.

#### 8.3 Community Reintegration Challenges

Even after completing formal rehabilitation processes, many former combatants face social exclusion and stigma from their communities. In local media reports, individuals who completed DDR training noted difficulty securing employment or social acceptance in towns like Mamfe and Limbe, where community members remain wary of returnees due to fear or resentment.<sup>3</sup> Such social barriers complicate psychological rehabilitation and risk undermining long-term reintegration goals.

#### 8.4 Implementation and Institutional Coordination Weaknesses

The effectiveness of rehabilitation is also undermined by weak institutional coordination and uneven implementation of programs. Although the National Committee for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (NCDDR) was established to unify efforts, evaluations report gaps in communication between state agencies, local administrations, and civil society partners, resulting in duplication of efforts or service gaps across regions.<sup>4</sup> For instance, training scheduled in one district may lack follow-up support in community reintegration because of coordination lapses.

#### 8.5 Vulnerable Groups and Child Rehabilitation

Children associated with armed groups remain particularly vulnerable during rehabilitation. A government–UN cooperation effort reported that over 1,189 children were registered for child-centred reintegration support at the Meri centre alone, yet stakeholders note that consistent access to education and psychosocial counseling remains uneven due to resource limitations and security concerns.<sup>5</sup> These disparities illustrate how rehabilitation systems can struggle to meet the diverse needs of affected populations.

#### 8.6 Reintegration and the Risk of Recidivism

General studies on post-detention reintegration in Cameroon have highlighted the risk of recidivism among returnees who fail to find stable livelihoods or social acceptance. Research on ex-convicts, though not conflict-specific, shows that individuals released from prison can face housing insecurity, unemployment, and community rejection, conditions that threaten rehabilitation outcomes.<sup>6</sup> This research underscores the need to address structural socio-economic deficits that equally affect former combatants.

#### 8.7 Human Rights and Legal Oversight Gaps

Finally, legal oversight weaknesses pose challenges for ensuring that rehabilitation

<sup>1</sup> International Crisis Group. (2020). *Cameroon: Managing the Anglophone crisis* (Africa Report No. 272).

<sup>2</sup> Monteh, R. N. (2021). Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR): A new paradigm in responding to the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon—Myth or reality. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 5(1), 390–400.

<sup>3</sup> Mimi Mefo Info. (2024). *Ex-combatants face challenges reintegrating into local communities*.

<sup>4</sup> Cameroon Tribune. (2024). *Bamenda DDR centre: Reintegration process taking shape*.

<sup>5</sup> International Organization for Migration & UNICEF. (2023). *Disarmament and reintegration: Cameroon has made child protection a priority in DDR*.

<sup>6</sup> Besin-Mengla, M. M. (2020). Reintegration difficulties of ex-convicts: Reasons for recidivism of ex-convicts in Cameroon. *African Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research*, 3(4), 10–24.

programs adhere to human rights standards. Human rights groups have repeatedly documented arbitrary arrests, prolonged detention without trial, and inadequate access to legal counsel for conflict-related detainees, creating conditions incompatible with humane rehabilitation.<sup>1</sup> In several documented cases, detainees in facilities such as Buea Central Prison reported prolonged legal limbo and little progress toward structured reintegration<sup>2</sup> highlighting the need for stronger legal safeguards.

### 9. Prospects for the Right-Based Rehabilitation

The rehabilitation of prisoners of war (POWs) and conflict-related detainees arising from the Anglophone armed conflict in Cameroon remains fraught with structural and normative challenges. Yet, within this complex landscape lie compelling prospects for the emergence of a robust rights-based rehabilitation architecture. Properly conceived, rights-based rehabilitation transcends administrative benevolence; it is anchored in the inviolability of human dignity, the restorative promise of justice, and the transformative pursuit of sustainable peace, as enshrined in international humanitarian and human rights law.

#### 9.1 Reinforcing Legal and Policy Synergy

A pivotal prospect lies in the deliberate harmonization of domestic legal frameworks with international and regional normative regimes. Cameroon's constitutional commitment to human dignity and freedom from degrading treatment provides fertile legal soil upon which rights-based rehabilitation may flourish.<sup>3</sup> Aligning domestic penal and rehabilitation policies more explicitly with the Geneva Conventions, alongside the incorporation of globally recognized benchmarks such as the Nelson Mandela Rules, would fortify legal certainty and embed rehabilitation as a non-derogable obligation rather than a discretionary concession.<sup>4</sup> Such normative convergence would elevate rehabilitation from policy aspiration to enforceable legal mandate.

#### 9.2 Institutionalizing Holistic Rehabilitation

#### Pathways

Equally promising is the institutional maturation of comprehensive and human-centered rehabilitation pathways within Cameroon's Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) framework. While existing DDR mechanisms offer vocational training and psychosocial assistance, their transformative potential can be amplified through standardized operational protocols infused with trauma-informed care, educational advancement, and livelihood sustainability. Comparative post-conflict experiences across Africa reveal that rehabilitation initiatives integrating psychological healing, economic empowerment, and long-term follow-up yield more enduring reintegration outcomes.<sup>5</sup> Embedding rights-sensitive indicators and rigorous monitoring mechanisms would ensure that institutional practice mirrors normative intent.

#### 9.3 Deepening Community and Faith-Based Engagement

Rights-based rehabilitation is ultimately consummated within communities, where social acceptance and collective healing take root. In this regard, the moral authority and grassroots reach of churches and faith-based organizations present a uniquely powerful avenue for reconciliation and psychosocial restoration. In the Anglophone regions of Cameroon, such actors have already demonstrated their capacity to foster dialogue, heal trauma, and rebuild fractured communal bonds.<sup>6</sup> Expanding structured collaboration with these institutions alongside traditional authorities and civil society offers a persuasive prospect for embedding restorative justice practices and dismantling the stigma that often shadows former detainees.

#### 9.4 Advancing Inclusive Protection for Vulnerable Groups

A genuinely rights-based rehabilitation paradigm must be deliberately inclusive, attuned to the distinct vulnerabilities of women, children formerly associated with armed groups, and persons with disabilities. Tailored rehabilitation measures ranging from specialized psychosocial

<sup>1</sup> CHRDA. (2024). *Report on increased human rights violations*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Republic of Cameroon. (1996). *Constitution of the Republic of Cameroon* (Law No. 96-06 of January 18, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> United Nations. (2015). *United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela Rules)*. United Nations.

<sup>5</sup> Humphreys, M., & Weinstein, J. M. (2007). Demobilization and reintegration. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 51(4), 531–567.

<sup>6</sup> Human Rights and Legal Research Centre. (2021). *Traditional rulers and faith-based actors as agents of reconciliation and reconstruction in the North-West and South-West Regions of Cameroon*.

support to educational reintegration and protection against exploitation—are indispensable for substantive equality. Strengthening and institutionalizing existing partnerships with international organizations can ensure that rehabilitation models are not only child-sensitive and gender-responsive but also normatively consonant with international human rights and child protection standards.<sup>1</sup>

#### 9.5 Elevating Accountability and Oversight

The durability of rights-based rehabilitation hinges on credible accountability and vigilant oversight. Strengthening judicial supervision, independent inspections, and the role of national and regional human rights institutions would inject transparency into detention and rehabilitation processes. Such mechanisms serve as vital safeguards against arbitrariness, prolonged detention without trial, and institutional neglect concerns persistently articulated by human rights observers.<sup>2</sup> Accountability, in this sense, is not punitive but protective, reinforcing legitimacy and public trust in rehabilitation frameworks.

#### 9.6 Harnessing Regional and International Solidarity

Cameroon’s rehabilitation agenda stands to benefit from strategic regional and international engagement. Normative instruments such as the African Union Transitional Justice Policy offer a visionary blueprint for embedding rehabilitation within broader peace-building and reconciliation architectures.<sup>3</sup> Through regional dialogue, technical assistance, and shared best practices, Cameroon can cultivate a rehabilitation framework that is both contextually responsive and normatively aligned with continental aspirations.

#### 9.7 Anchoring Rehabilitation in Evidence-Based Policy

Finally, the future of rights-based rehabilitation rests upon rigorous empirical inquiry and evidence-driven policymaking. Systematic data collection on rehabilitation outcomes, reintegration trajectories, and recidivism risks would enable targeted interventions and judicious resource allocation. Collaboration with academic institutions and research centers can transform rehabilitation from an ad hoc endeavor into a strategically informed and empirically

validated enterprise, ensuring that policy is guided by evidence rather than expediency.

## 10. Finding

This study finds that human rights and the rehabilitation of prisoners of war in the Anglophone armed conflict in Cameroon occupies a contested space between normative aspiration and practical constraint. While the legal and institutional architecture for rehabilitation exists, its implementation remains uneven and often undermined by structural, security, and human rights challenges.

First, the research establishes that international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and African regional instruments collectively impose a clear obligation on states to pursue rehabilitation as a core component of humane detention and post-conflict recovery. Cameroon’s constitutional and statutory framework reflects these obligations in principle, particularly through guarantees of human dignity and reforms aimed at reintegration. However, the study finds that the domestic legal framework lacks sufficient specificity and enforceability to consistently translate these norms into practice for prisoners of war and conflict-related detainees.

Second, the findings reveal that institutional mechanisms most notably the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) program represent a significant step toward operationalizing rehabilitation, particularly in the North-West and South-West regions. Practical initiatives such as vocational training, psychosocial support, and community reintegration efforts demonstrate a growing recognition of rehabilitation as a peace-building tool. Nonetheless, these initiatives remain constrained by insecurity, limited resources, coordination gaps, and inconsistent access, which dilute their overall impact.

Third, the study finds that human rights challenges continue to shadow the rehabilitation process, including prolonged detention, inadequate legal oversight, selective access to rehabilitation programs, and insufficient protection for vulnerable groups such as children and women. Social stigmatization and community resistance further complicate

<sup>1</sup> International Organization for Migration & UNICEF. (2023). *Disarmament and reintegration: Cameroon has made child protection a priority in DDR*.

<sup>2</sup> CHRDA. (2024). *Report on increased human rights violations*.

<sup>3</sup> African Union Commission. (2019). *African Union transitional justice policy*. African Union.

reintegration, underscoring the reality that rehabilitation cannot succeed in isolation from broader societal healing and reconciliation processes.

Fourth, the research highlights that rights-based rehabilitation is most effective when it is holistic, inclusive, and community-anchored. Comparative insights from other African post-conflict contexts demonstrate that sustainable rehabilitation requires the integration of legal safeguards, psychosocial care, economic empowerment, and community participation. In this regard, the study finds that the involvement of faith-based organizations, traditional authorities, and civil society actors in Cameroon offers a promising pathway for reinforcing social acceptance and restorative justice.

Finally, the study concludes that the future of rehabilitation in the Anglophone Cameroon conflict hinges on the deliberate alignment of law, policy, and practice. Strengthening legal clarity, institutional accountability, evidence-based programming, and regional cooperation emerges as essential for transforming rehabilitation from a fragmented response into a rights-affirming and durable peace-building strategy.

## 11. Conclusion

This article has examined human rights and the rehabilitation of prisoners of war in the Anglophone armed conflict in Cameroon through the analytical lenses of progress, pitfalls, and prospects, demonstrating that rehabilitation is not a peripheral post-conflict concern, but a core legal obligation grounded in international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and African regional norms. The study underscores that, in non-international armed conflicts, the treatment and rehabilitation of detained combatants remain central to the protection of human dignity and the realization of sustainable peace.

The analysis reveals that Cameroon has made measured yet uneven progress in institutionalizing rehabilitation, particularly through Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) initiatives and complementary community-based mechanisms. Drawing from practical rehabilitation experiences in the North-West and South-West regions, including state-led programs and the restorative engagement of faith-based organizations, the article bridges normative legal

frameworks with empirical realities. Nonetheless, persistent insecurity, institutional fragility, resource constraints, and societal stigma continue to undermine the full realization of rights-based rehabilitation.

This article makes an original and substantive contribution to international humanitarian law and human rights scholarship by advancing a rights-based framework for the rehabilitation of prisoners of war in a non-international armed conflict, using Cameroon as a case study. It reconceptualizes rehabilitation as a legally enforceable obligation rather than a discretionary post-conflict policy, thereby closing a critical gap between the law of armed conflict and post-detention reintegration practice. By integrating localized rehabilitation experiences from Cameroon's conflict-affected regions with broader African comparative insights, the study offers a transferable analytical model applicable to similarly situated conflict-affected states. In doing so, it enriches doctrinal debate while providing concrete guidance for policymakers, humanitarian actors, and post-conflict justice practitioners.

Ultimately, the article concludes that the future of prisoner rehabilitation in Cameroon hinges on the extent to which legal norms are translated into consistent institutional practice. When pursued as a rights-affirming and justice-oriented enterprise, rehabilitation can function as a powerful instrument for reconciliation, social repair, and durable peace. Conversely, failure to anchor rehabilitation in human rights risks perpetuating cycles of exclusion, insecurity, and post-conflict fragility.

## 12. Recommendations

Given the challenges and gaps identified in the rehabilitation of prisoners of war in Cameroon's Anglophone conflict, there is a clear need for deliberate, structured, and actionable measures to ensure that rehabilitation aligns with human rights obligations and contributes meaningfully to sustainable peace. While prospects highlight opportunities and emerging trends, recommendations translate these insights into concrete policy, legal, and institutional actions. These measures are aimed at strengthening legal frameworks, improving oversight, enhancing the capacity of implementing actors, and fostering inclusive community reintegration, thereby ensuring that rehabilitation is not only a theoretical commitment but a practical,

enforceable, and rights-respecting process.

### 12.1 Institutional Strengthening and Legal Codification

The Government of Cameroon should enact clear legislation that explicitly defines the rights and entitlements of prisoners of war and conflict-related detainees during rehabilitation. Domestic laws should codify the procedural safeguards and obligations for detention, reintegration, and post-release support to ensure that rehabilitation is legally enforceable rather than discretionary. Establishing a central coordinating body to oversee rehabilitation programs across regions would improve consistency and accountability.

### 12.2 Oversight and Accountability Mechanisms

Independent oversight mechanisms, including the judiciary, the National Commission on Human Rights and Freedoms, and civil society actors, should be empowered to monitor detention conditions and rehabilitation processes. Regular audits, inspections, and public reporting will ensure transparency and reduce the risk of abuse, arbitrary detention, or rights violations during reintegration.

### 12.3 Capacity Building for Practitioners and Staff

Personnel involved in rehabilitation, including DDR officers, social workers, and correctional staff, should receive specialized training in human rights, psychosocial support, and restorative justice principles. Continuous professional development programs will strengthen the quality and effectiveness of rehabilitation interventions.

### 12.4 Targeted Support for Vulnerable Groups

Specific programs should be designed to address the unique needs of women, children formerly associated with armed groups, and persons with disabilities. This includes access to trauma-informed care, education, vocational training, and protection against social stigmatization, ensuring that reintegration is equitable and inclusive.

### 12.5 Community Engagement and Reintegration Support

Local communities, traditional authorities, and faith-based organizations should be formally integrated into rehabilitation programs. Initiatives such as reconciliation dialogues, mentorship, and community-based social support can reduce stigma and enhance social acceptance, creating conditions for sustainable

reintegration.

### 12.6 Monitoring, Evaluation, and Evidence-Based Policy

The government and international partners should establish a systematic framework for monitoring and evaluating rehabilitation outcomes, including reintegration success rates and recidivism. Data collected should inform policy adjustments, resource allocation, and best practice development to enhance long-term effectiveness.

### 12.7 Regional and International Cooperation

Cameroon should actively engage with African Union frameworks and regional human rights institutions to exchange best practices, technical expertise, and lessons learned from other post-conflict contexts. Partnerships with international organizations should be structured to provide funding, capacity-building, and technical assistance, ensuring that programs remain accountable and rights-compliant.

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